Trusting your Gut: Concerns about panic attacks and racialized vision

Par Anna Cook[1]

Summary

Feminist self-defence classes often use the trope of 'trusting one's intuition' as an empowering way to talk about one's own ability to protect oneself. Trust your gut! You have the resources to stay safe!

While I do think that this is an empowering way to teach self-defence, it raises concerns about the trustworthiness of our intuitions. Our 'intuition' that a situation or a person is dangerous is often not a neutral assessment of a situation, but is one that is often (mis)shaped by ideas about *what* and *who* is dangerous. In this respect, I worry that telling people to trusting their instincts amounts to justifying racist and classist ideas of who is dangerous.

These concerns about the inadequacy of one's intuition have become heightened by my own PTSD-triggered panic attacks. I have been since relearning to trust my intuition through cognitive behavourial therapy (CBT). I want to suggest that strategies similar to those used in CBT might be helpful in order to "see better" and thus, to foster a less classist and racist intuition.

Résumé

Les cours d'auto-défense féministes reconnaissent souvent l'importance d'écouter ses intuitions afin de valoriser la capacité de chaque femme de se protéger.

Bien que je reconnaisse que c'est une stratégie qui favorise la prise en charge, j'ai des inquiétudes sur la justesse de nos intuitions. Notre intuition qu'une situation ou qu'une personne soit dangereuse n'est souvent pas une évaluation neutre, mais une qui est déformée par des idées de qui et quoi est dangereux. De cette façon, je m'inquiète que l'affirmation qu'on écoute nos intuitions revienne, en fin de compte, à justifier des idées racistes et classistes de qui est dangereux.

Ces inquiétudes sur la justesse de nos intuitions sont amplifiées par mes propres crises de panique. Dans le processus de mon traitement TCC (thérapie comportement et cognitive), j'ai dû m'entrainer pour ravoir de la confiance dans mes propres intuitions. Je suggère que les stratégies utilisées dans la thérapie comportement et cognitive, peuvent être utile dans le processus de « mieux voir » pour, ensuite, favoriser des intuitions moins racistes et classistes.

Mots-clés : Alcoff, Spinoza, intuition, racialized vision, self-defence

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I teach self-defence techniques to elementary and high school students as part of assault prevention workshops. These workshops focus on encouraging assertiveness and on creating a sense of one's body as powerful, thereby challenging the idea of a young person's body as inherently vulnerable and weak. Rather than propagating myths about assault and encouraging strategies based on controlling the victim's behaviour, these workshops aim at cultivating a sense that kids are capable of fighting off an attacker and are not responsible for assault. As part of the self-defence portion of these workshops, we discuss the importance of trusting our instincts. Trust your gut! You have the resources to stay safe! Trust that little voice or that feeling in your stomach!

Although I talk a lot about the importance of trusting one's own instincts, I do have some questions about the trustworthiness of intuition in light of my own panic attacks. I believe in the importance of trusting one's own instincts and of teaching kids to trust their gut but I know that for myself, I can't always trust my instincts because that little voice inside is screaming out in situations where I am perfectly safe.

My interest in questioning this trope of 'trusting one's intuition' is not entirely theoretical but partly stems from my own personal work of 're-training' my intuition. My experience with PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) has meant that I believe (or I have thoughts) that I will be attacked again. I am just waiting for the subway to explode, for the bridge to collapse, for the shooters to find me at home, at schools or on the street. In response to these fears, I have developed a hyper-vigilance. Since I have thoughts that an attack is *bound* to happen (again), I have become hyper-alert to any signs—or rather what I interpret to be signs—of danger. This way of seeing in the world is one in which mundane actions, looks or gestures are constantly being interpreted as secret signals, warning glances or imminent attack.

So I balance a bit of a contradiction whereby, in my work I talk extensively about the importance of trusting one's own intuition, while in my day-to-day dealings with the world, I have had to fight against listening to my own instinct—trying to suppress it or to quiet my fears knowing that the palpable feeling of panic will dissipate.

As a Spinozist, I believe that being in a state of constant fear comes to shape, alter and distort one's perception of the world, and thus can severely 'damage' one's intuition. Moreover, I think that looking at panic attacks can be helpful insofar as they magnify the

shortcomings of instincts.

As I am more able to watch (as if from a distance) my own feelings of distress and panic, I am able to discern patterns of thoughts and I have come to identify who and what freaks me out. My fears of who is the kind of person who is most likely to blow up the subway car or to start shooting in the classroom mirror my own experiences. And so, anyone who I take to have a similarity to the Dawson shooter (whose name I have happily forgotten)—angry white guy in a trench coat—freaks me out more. But my vision is also affected by other images. Images that I have accumulated of brutal violence haunt me (there are many films or TV shows that I now desperately wish I had never watched), and these images are, unsurprisingly, quite racist and propagate a fear of the poor. I have accumulated, through various media outlets, a huge number of images that depict assault, 'terrorist' crimes and violence as being perpetrated by men of colour or the poor or those with mental illness.

I fear that, for many of us, our intuition that a situation or a person is dangerous is not a neutral assessment of a situation, but is one that is (mis)shaped by environmental ideas about what and who is dangerous. And so my concern about the self-defence trope of trusting one's instincts is this: when we tell people to trust their own instincts (and I am purposefully using the terms instincts and intuition quite loosely here), are we legitimizing racist ideas of who is dangerous? Can we *really* trust our instincts or intuition about feeling safe when these ideas are so distorted by racialized vision?

In order to flesh out this concern, I will turn to Linda Martín Alcoff's account of racialized vision and to Spinoza's explanation of the strength of imaginative associations.

Alcoff describes racialization as a process whereby certain bodily features, such as skin colour, hair texture, nose and eye shape, etc., are taken to be salient markers of 'race', such that race is taken to be a natural property that can be read off the body (Alcoff, 2000: 33-35). Physical features come to be markers for potential behaviour and ability. The process of racialization is one whereby visual cues come to inform how we assign characteristics or suspicions of violent behaviour. This can result in pre-reflective responses to people of colour—responses such as fear and suspicion.

She affirms that racialization occurs and is naturalized at the perceptual level. Insofar as racialized vision is pre-reflective it does not make explicit its meaning-making

activity, but rather sees the particular meaning (of being overly aggressive for example) as belonging to the person (of young men of colour for example). Perception is thus always forgetting and erasing its activity. Insofar as vision lends itself to the process of racialization, it seems that we cannot take what we 'see' or 'intuit' to tell us anything that is independent from this process. The act of seeing is not the neutral accumulation of visual information, but is rather an activity of interpretation such that we see things *as* things, we read certain people *as* more likely to be violent.

While Alcoff's analysis of racialized vision raises questions about how the way we see informs pre-reflective reactions of fear, I think that Spinoza's exploration of imaginative ideas can be useful in articulating the power of the associations of ideas.
Spinoza tells us that imaginative knowledge comes to form universal notions (such as Chair, Man, Horse, etc.) by confounding a great number of images. He observes that universal notions are formed in accordance with what "the body has more often been affected by, and what the mind imagines or recollects more easily" (Spinoza, 1996: EIIP40S). For example, according to my own history of bodily affections of danger and threatening situations, through depictions in movies and television, my mind coalesces images of poor men, men of colour or men with mental illness for example, and comprehends them under the attribute Dangerous Person (the television show "24" is a good example of this). The more I watch television depicting 'terrorists' in a certain way, the more forcefully I am likely to comprehend the universal notion of Dangerous Person as a composite of these particular affections. These ideas of the imagination are determined by the social milieu such that the meaning of the universal will vary according to one's environment (Spinoza, EIIP18S). Since we form these images in an environment that is racist and classist, ideas about what and who is dangerous are likely to be similarly racist and classist.

Given the force of these imaginative associations and the very fact of racialized vision, the concern about the authority of our intuition seems all the more urgent. As an assault prevention facilitator, I worry that talking about trusting one's instincts may end up legitimizing racist fears. The question thus becomes, how can we come to be more trusting of our intuitions about safety.

In order to begin to address this question, I want to suggest that there might be a

close link (or a closer one that henceforth assumed) between thought patterns common to anxiety disorders and thought patterns of racialized vision. Therefore, I propose (if only timidly) that a consideration of CBT (cognitive behavourial therapy) strategies might be helpful in the project of cultivating less classist and racist intuitions. In this respect, I believe that challenging racist vision is essential in the project of relearning to trust one's intuition.

CBT is a form of therapy that is commonly used in the treatment of anxiety disorders. It is a form of talk therapy that, in my experience, works at interrupting the vicious cycle between ideas of fear and physical manifestations of fear —that is, it attempts to alter a dysfunctional cognitive-affective-behavioural process. During a panic attack, my hypervigilance—which stems from my belief that I must always be ready to fight or flee—triggers physical manifestations of fear, such as heart racing, constricted chest, sweaty palms, rush of blood to my limbs, etc., which in turn come to confirm and strength these ideas and thus intensify the physical feelings of fear, and so and so forth.

My experience with CBT has been one of looking at my thought patterns in order to rationally understanding why certain things freak me out. This involves convincing myself that physical feelings of fear are not signs of imminent danger by revealing the extent to which my evaluations of what is unsafe can be unrealistic and unhelpful. So when I say that I have been trying to 're-train' or 're-learn' my intuition, I mean that I have been working towards being able to listen and trust my intuition by identifying the triggers that provoke the feeling of constant threat and danger.

Another part of this strategy is to re-wire my response to physical manifestations of fear. The goal is to become more comfortable with physical discomfort. This can be done through exposure therapy whereby I purposefully put myself in situations where I am likely to be triggered. I scare the shit out of myself and I survive the feelings of panic. By repeatedly surviving these panic attacks (and I mean this literally), I come to forge new mental associations whereby physical manifestations of fear do not indicate loss of security. This repeated experience of being safe and scared helps train my intuition that being scared does not always mean that I am in danger.

Now that I have summarized strategies used in my own CBT treatment, I would like to return to Alcoff and Spinoza in order to articulate how these strategies can be

useful in challenging racist intuitions. Similarly to CBT, Spinoza suggests that we take a serious look at the thought patterns that have created universal notions (such as Dangerous Person). Rational knowledge comes when we see our ideas within their causal context. When we can start to understand and make explicit the connection between the plethora of racist ideas in our environment and our racist fears, we can have a more rational understanding of ourselves. We come to recognize that our fears do not tell us 'facts' about the external world, but rather are products of one's own historical associations with a particular object of fear.

Furthermore, Alcoff suggests that, in order to denaturalize the process of racialization, we take up the project of seeing critically. Importantly, Alcoff does not assert that we somehow strive for a future without seeing racial identity. Although racial identity is firstly constructed through racism, what subjects make of those identities is *more* than just racism makes of them. To deny racial identity is to deny all the work that racialized subjects have done to fight racism. Moreover, colour-blindness hides racial inequality and the history of racism and colonialism.

She puts forward the need for a critical vision (rather than a raceless one). Seeing critically—to "see better"—involves seeing racial identity as a situated lived reality that, although constructed, is not fictitious (Alcoff, 2000: 38). Alcoff sees a critical potential for vision within her project of seeing better. This project is one of making explicit—of seeing—the process of racialization. To see better (or to intuit better) is to see race not as a natural property but rather as historically constituted.

Taking a cue from Alcoff, I think it is important to recognize that to deny *what* and *how* we see does not help change racist mental associations. Just like it does no good to simply deny the existence of PTSD-triggered panic attacks, it does not help to deny the fact of racialized vision. Similarly to exposure therapy, I think it can be helpful to, not only make explicit the process of racialization, but also to become more and more comfortable with the discomfort of seeing one's own racialized vision. Explicitly thinking about panic attacks and racialized vision as interpretive meaning-making *activities* can destabilize dysfunctional mental associations. That is, thinking about panic attacks and racialized vision as interpretive processes that are embedded within environmental racist ideas, rather than as neutral assessments of who or what is

dangerous, can help weaken the strength of racist intuitions.

Where does this leave us? What does this all mean for my self-defence classes? How comfortable should we be with using the trope of trusting one's intuition?

While I believe that talking about listening to one's intuition can be a really powerful way to think about self-defence, I do not think that we can be content with simply stating 'trust your gut'. We must recognize the extent to which one's gut feelings are informed by one's (racist, sexist, classist, homophobic, ableist) environment. And as such, it is important to propagate more accurate information about assault and violence (for example, that more than 80% of assault is committed by known and trusted adults) in an attempt to attenuate the power of our distorted vision. It is dangerous to take one's intuition to be a merely 'natural' reaction to threat. Intuition is not completely innocent. While instincts might often give us invaluable information (albeit in mysterious ways) about our feelings of safety, it does not merely *reflect* facts about the world, but is rather entrenched in racialized ways of seeing. It involves a process of interpretation that is informed by and tangled up with environmental ideas of what or who is dangerous.

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