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**SENSITIVITY AND INTELLIGENCE:  
A CLINICAL CONSIDERATION IN MENTAL HEALTH TREATMENT OF WOMEN**

by  
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**ABSTRACT:** This paper offers a clinical definition of sensitivity and describes the role of this human characteristic in the mental health treatment of women. Material is taken from the author's 3 decades of research and clinical work using C-CTherapy®.

**SENSITIVITY: A MULTIFACETED DEFINITION**

**Footsteps In The Dark:** A woman walks toward her car. The clickity-clack of her high heels echoes in the cavernous parking garage. A far-away door slams. Car fumes. Elevator doors bang closed. Footsteps. She listens. She hears a man's heavy foot plant. Something nags at her. Her gait quickens. She readies her key. Should I look around? No, puff myself up and move to the middle of the aisle. She jumps into the car and slams shut her door.

**A Day Hike:** A woman hikes along an untended creek bed thick with vines. She sniffs the summer air perfumed by the eucalyptus and redwood forest. Glad I came. She traverses a sagging retaining wall. Then she stops, her senses alert. Ahead, strewn along the path lie crumpled soda cans, an empty cookie box, a used condom, a syringe. Druggies. Should I continue? A shadow flutters. A figure slips behind a tree. No Way. Heart beating, she retraces her steps. Better safe than sorry.

**Listening For Cues:** A woman confides to me, "When my son climbs into the car, I can tell immediately – before he's said a word – if he's had a problem during the day. I can tell by the sound of my husband's footstep whether he's in a good or bad mood. My ailing mother's voice tells me if her pain is great. I'm intuitive. We all have this ability to read people, their posture, their eyes, the way they hold their head. If you pay attention to people, you can pick up a whole bunch of impressions. Listening for cues is not something I developed, I have done it all along. I notice what's around me, the flowers, little bits and pieces."

These mental maneuverings are routine for women. A thousand times a day we habitually and mechanically check our territory and the people in it. No matter the country or the language, women listen for cues. "The

heart that is soonest awake to the flowers, is always the first to be touched with the thorns," wrote Irish poet, Thomas Moore<sup>1</sup>. His quote is not a sour grapes attitude. Instead it portrays the pluses and minuses of sensitivity, the ingredient that determines our responsiveness to small changes.

### Biological Definition

The California poppies in my garden unfurl on sunny days. On gloomy, overcast days their tangerine-colored petals remain tightly coiled. Animals also respond to their surroundings. My dog wags her tail when I walk into the house. At another's – a stranger's – footsteps, she barks. When a storm approaches, I feel logy, ready to nap. On clear days, when the atmospheric pressure rises, I feel energized.

Living organisms respond to changing conditions in their surroundings such as light, moisture and temperature. All living plants and animals, including humans, possess responsiveness as the main component of their survival equipment. "Responsiveness" – that degree of behavior resulting from the stimulus of changing circumstances – is the biological definition of sensitivity.

### The Social-Behavioral Definition

In human behavior, the definition of responsiveness expands to include whatever an individual experiences, from ideas and thoughts to jogging down the street, operating a computer, or driving a car full of boisterous teenagers. Sensing, i.e. use and function of our sensory equipment, is prerequisite to responsiveness.

Anthropologist Ashley Montagu clarifies in *The Natural Superiority of Women* the definition of sensitivity in humans as a:

~ "...quickness of response to a total complex situation...both physical and mental."

~ "Quickness is equated with nervousness or jitteriness or excitability."<sup>2</sup>

Gwen, a 28 year-old school teacher described her sensitivity this way: "An itchy feeling, using my senses. I'm like a dog whose ears are constantly perked up." She likes that degree of responsiveness to changes of small magnitude. That trait makes her an individual highly receptive to the feelings, the emotional behavior, of others.<sup>3</sup> "It makes me feel alive," she said. Even to music I hear or colors and textures I see, it doesn't have to be on a personal level, it's on all levels of the senses. I'm pretty perceptive and quick to respond to other people's emotions."

Survival of all species, from poppies to puppies, amoebas to zebras, from roosters, hens, and chickens to men, women and children, requires responsiveness to changing circumstances. For humans, these changing conditions include all emotions, those we experience ourselves along with those we witness in people around us. Therefore, a rapid, spontaneous response to emotion must be included in our definition of human sensitivity.

Women are credited with being more sensitive than men. First, physically. As Gwen said, "Being a woman and having this incredible body – this reproductive miracle – getting your period every month, your body becomes sensitive, whether its your breasts or your skin breaks out. Everything changes. You get used to that on a basic level. I feel my highs and I really feel my lows." We females know our physiology is not static, it's dynamic, cyclical, constantly changing. We live by it.

Also, women are noted for being more responsive [sensitive] to touch and loud noises. Research has proven that women have better senses of smell, taste, sight, and sound than men: "...they can distinguish color more accurately and better remember the physical contexts of their experiences (such as what someone was wearing, or how a home was decorated). They have ~«an outstanding ability to read facial expression," Emily Jenkins

wrote in *Victorian Secret*, quoting Helen Fisher.<sup>4</sup>

My female patients recognize these attributes. They know just what I'm talking about when I explain that industrial research shows what Montagu observed long ago, that women excel "in tasks involving the rapid perception of details and frequent shifts of attention."<sup>5</sup> My patients readily add their personal evidence: how they tune into their children's moods long before their husbands notice; how the tension in their boss's voice warns of a temper before their male colleagues have a clue; how the swiftness or sluggishness of a lover's footstep foretells his humor.

These observations about women's sensory capacity are not new. In 1968, research confirmed that "girls, in general, do better than boys on tests involving aesthetic response to color, shape and discrimination in pictures...it is found that girls include more detail than boys –yet another indication of the greater sensitivity [attention] of girls to their environment than of boys."<sup>6</sup> Montagu further writes, "...by virtue of her ...greater sensitivity, the female of the human species is more alive than the male is....This may be a matter of cultural conditioning, or it may have some biological basis, probably a combination of both. In any event, women do, in general, seem to be 'quicker on the uptake' than men."<sup>7</sup>

I agree with Montagu. My starting point is what Montagu calls women's intuition and what I call sensitivity. He writes, "Woman's intuition, as everyone knows, is a very real faculty that most women possess in a form far more highly developed than anything the random male ever acquires. It is a kind of 'sixth sense,' an ability to 'listen in the dark,' a capacity for picking up, as it were, vibrations of very short wave length almost as soon as they have been generated."<sup>8</sup> Sensing what surrounds us is not a frivolous activity. Females learn to listen for cues at the knees of their mothers, aunts and grandmothers. Previous generations of women, too, had to rely on their mental quickness of response for survival.

#### MUSCLE VS. SMARTS: BRAUN VS. INTELLIGENCE

We all recognize that rough and tumble, charge-forth style of getting what you want or need. Physical strength and mass are generally considered male characteristics. For example, three men moving a piano around a tight corner push. They tug. They squeeze. Their first inclination is to use brute force until Mary, who has been studying the geometry, suggests removing the piano legs. The piano glides around the corner with inches to spare.

Men generally rely on their size and strength. Women resort to their wits. Women adapt to circumstances and cooperate with others as their survival strategies. Women also are more prone to call upon others to assist in difficult situations, rather than toughing it out alone. A woman with a vacuum-sealed jar will bang the lid and, if that doesn't work, hand the jar to the nearest male. Women know the limits of their physical strength and work within them. Asking for help requires the knack for knowing who, what, when and where to find team members, an intelligent maneuver.

Physical strength allows for bullying through tough situations, much more so for men than for women. As science writer Natalie Angier points out in *Woman, An Intimate Geography*, "...muscles account for 42 percent of the total body weight in the male and only 36 percent in the female..."<sup>9</sup> The unique physicality of the gender influences how males and females respond to their surroundings. Few women can overpower their male opposition. Women think their way out of tight spots using their sensory equipment. For women, sensitivity and intelligence, not physical strength, ensures survival.

#### SENSITIVITY COUPLED WITH INTELLIGENCE = MENTAL ACUITY

All human beings embody sensitivity and intelligence. Sensitivity is our responsiveness to stimuli. Intelligence is the mental ability to grasp and utilize information, the means by which data is mentally processed and interpreted. Our intelligence and sensitivity forge into mental acuity.

Another way to understand mental acuity is to recognize that, while sensitivity is the receiver of input, intelligence allows the individual to process what has been sensed. How broad an horizon of observation depends upon an individual's degree of intelligence. So we're not talking about people with minimal intelligence and limited cognitive capacity. We are talking about women with sensitivity and intelligence, women who notice and process a wide range of details and nuances in their surroundings.

Bright, perceptive Tasha, for instance, noticed the smallest gestures of strangers and interpreted them as "something beautiful, sad or distressing." The more she noticed, the more she reacted. The more she reacted, the more emotional energy she consumed. Tasha burned up so much energy that often by afternoon she was wiped out and had to take a nap.

We react to what we notice. Conversely, if we do not notice something, we do not react to it. Natalie Angier was right when she wrote in *Woman*, "We mistakenly equate emotionality with the primitive and rationality with the advanced, but in fact the more intelligent the animal, the deeper its passions. The greater the intelligence, the greater the demand on the emotions..."<sup>10</sup> For women, sensitivity acts as the absorbent [receiver] for emotional cues, including gestures, speech inflection, or even the mood and ambient emotion of those around her. And mental acuity ensures survival.

Women I interviewed reported many instances of talking their way out of kidnap and rape situations. Their stories began with a similar position: "I knew I couldn't overpower him." One twenty-something webmaster told me how in a convenience store parking lot five guys "converged on me. It wasn't dark yet. It was a busy intersection. My hands were full. I saw them coming. They surrounded the car. I didn't have any way to defend myself. For whatever reason, I made the decision to address them as friends I just ran into. 'Hey, you guys, how're you doing?' They got totally confused, and looked at each other. Do we know her? Is she talking to us? When that happened, I backed out of the circle, went around them and returned to the store."

Her mental acuity saved her life. "It was as if another part of me took control of the situation. I went into emergency action. Mine was not a prepared plan. It was nothing I'd ever thought about. It turned out to be the right response. Afterwards, they pelted the old homeless lady outside the store with rocks. They were as dangerous as I had guessed." Her testimony represents what other women have said.

There can be no doubt that how we women quickly interpret information and respond to our surroundings determines whether we survive or do not survive. We depend upon our sensory equipment in ways that our male counterparts do not. "[Men] do not possess it [sensitivity] so highly developed a degree as most women. In any event, in men the capacity seems to become progressively desensitized so that by the time they reach adult age there is, in most of them, very little of it left. Women, on the other hand, receive every assistance for its development, for sensitivity to human relations is woman's special domain," wrote Montagu.<sup>11</sup>

Neither Montagu nor I are saying that men are not intelligent nor apt to be sensitive. What we are saying is that men do not rely on their sensitivity and intelligence – their mental acuity – as their predominant survival modality. We offer, instead, a description of how differently the survival equipment of the genders influences their mental and emotional development.

## OUR SENSORY EQUIPMENT

We do not select our sensory equipment. We have no choice in that matter. Our constitutional package comes already outfitted, whether or not we want or like the particulars. As Tasha, another young woman, put it: "My friends tell me I'm too sensitive, that I overreact. But I didn't ask to be sensitive. I arrived from my mother's womb that way." In other words, we cannot, at whim, keep or get rid of the way we are made up. Just because I don't like my height, for instance, does not mean that I can, at will, stretch myself taller or shrink myself shorter. Similarly, we can not hold onto or discard our sensitivity or intelligence. No choice is involved.

This is how our emotional equipment functions. Listening for cues sets off a mental chain reaction. Our thoughts travel busily along the links making up that chain. Prompted by what we notice, we review each thought and action, their meaning and what to do with them. Thinking flows from link to link, creating an emotional reaction. "That's a huge part of me," Tasha said. "I see gestures between people and ponder what they mean – something beautiful, sad or distressing – it makes me feel deep emotions." How we women function is to notice and sense what's around us, to listen and figure out, to understand what footsteps, grimaces, tone of voice mean. Ours is not a feeble make-up. It is one of flexibility and adaptation. It is our attribute.

## IS SENSITIVITY A HELP OR AN HINDRANCE?

Sensitivity can be both. Women I interviewed gave me the examples reported in this paper of how their sensing ability helped and hindered them. Yet, none could imagine life without their capacity to receive cues.

Think about the hiker who saw the drug paraphernalia at the stream site. She noticed the cues and recognized their implication, then left even though she longed for her day in the woods.

Or a thirty-something entrepreneur who told me: "Many times I intuited something about a man I'd dated. But I would ignore it. That caused me a lot of pain because my hunches were right. My problem is listening to my intuition and trusting it, no matter what."

And with our hiker, if she hadn't listened to the cues, what trouble would have awaited her?

Also, our sensory equipment, so critical to our survival, can contribute to our depressive tendencies. Tasha, for instance, absorbed the textures, colors, and nuances of the world around her. She was hypersensitive. She could not screen out irrelevant stimuli or disengage herself from what her senses absorbed. She had not learned how to use her sensitivity to her advantage. In fact, her sensitivity fueled her depression. To further complicate the situation neither she nor her cognitive therapist recognized the role her sensitivity played.

## MISINTERPRETATION OF MENTAL ACUITY IN THE WORKPLACE

The workplace is one location where mental acuity emerges as "emotionality." The corporate world requires employees to bridle their emotional behavior. If, however, the emotion is marketable, as is enthusiasm for the company's product, then emoting is okay.

A public relations specialist confided to me, "My friends and I feel our emotion and intuition [sensitivity and intelligence] is what makes us so good at what we do. It makes me mad when people say, 'Calm down. Give me the logic.' I say, 'Look, I can't. I'm passionate, this is me. My fifteen, twenty years experience tells me this is the way we should do things.' With the wrong group, it doesn't work. They think, 'Oh, you're upset.' I say, 'I'm not upset, I'm just talking. I'm talking excitedly.' Why is it that emotion is not okay? Why do I have to change?"

The public relations specialist was disinclined to change her emotional self to suit others. Instead, she adjusted herself by leaving the corporate world and working as a free-lancer.

On the other hand, Josie, a young medical student, found it essential to adjust her emotional self. She left home a sensitive, naive 21-year old, who discovered the ability to put up a "very stern and harsh wall if I need to."

Her true nature complimented her compassionate bedside manner. But her colleagues discounted her opinions when her emotionality emerged during clinical consultations. She had to learn to discriminate between those cues that required her attention and those that muddled her concentration. She had to learn not to respond to everything around her or at least to shift from an emotional response to one of clinical detachment with her peers.

While the doctor adapted her emotional capabilities, the public relations specialist adjusted her lifestyle. Each woman realized that her sensitivity and intelligence helped and hindered her career. Their mental acuity allowed them to adapt.

### SUPERIOR RESILIENCE

The women in my studies represent having what Montagu recognized as "the female's superior resiliency, her possession of a mechanism [her mental acuity] that permits her to absorb the shocks of life, to tolerate the stresses and strains put upon her, much more efficiently than the male...In short, woman bends and survives, man keeps a stiff upper lip and breaks."<sup>12</sup>

None of these women are thin-skinned. Their acute sensing antennae and peripheral vision regarding behavior grew from intelligence and sensitivity. Listening for cues and noticing other people's behavior results in survival. Protecting ourselves from perceived dangers is universal and drives all human beings. Men use their brawn. Women use their sensory equipment. The consequence is that a woman's mental acuity is far more active than a man's.

### CONCLUSION

Whether we're dealing with a small man or a large woman does not matter. Whether the gender differences are a result of nature versus nurture does not interest me. The givens remain: Female sensitivity is here to stay. Our sensitivity and intelligence constitutes our survival equipment. We use this facility more so than do men.

Mental health treatment designed for women must address a woman's level of sensitivity coupled with her innate level of intelligence. The therapist's task is to help the female patient work with the emotional equipment she's got, not to eliminate her innate capacity to respond to small changes or subdue her mental acuity. Or, as Norman A. Gillies, Clinical Ethnologist,<sup>13</sup> said, "We don't change the patient. We teach the patient how to extricate herself from self-victimization." In short, the therapist must work with what is there, even if the therapist doesn't agree with what is there.

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