

# ‘These are becoming lost skills that we need to recapture’

The new book *Rapport*, by Emily Alison and Laurence Alison, offers ‘The four ways to read people’. Jon Sutton asked them about it.

**Promising evidence-based ways to read people: that’s a pretty crowded market. What makes your approach stand out?**

*Emily:* Two aspects make our work very distinct. The first is that it draws on a number of foundation theories within both social and clinical psychology – from Leary’s Interpersonal Circumplex, Birtchnell’s theory of Relating, Miller and Rollnick’s Motivational Interviewing approaches and of course Carl Rogers person centred philosophy. The second is that our work is based entirely on the analysis and study of real-world interactions between people, including the largest corpus of police/suspect interviews

ever compiled. And of course, by ‘reading people’ we mean using what we know about relating to make a connection – that is as much about reading the situation as well as the person.

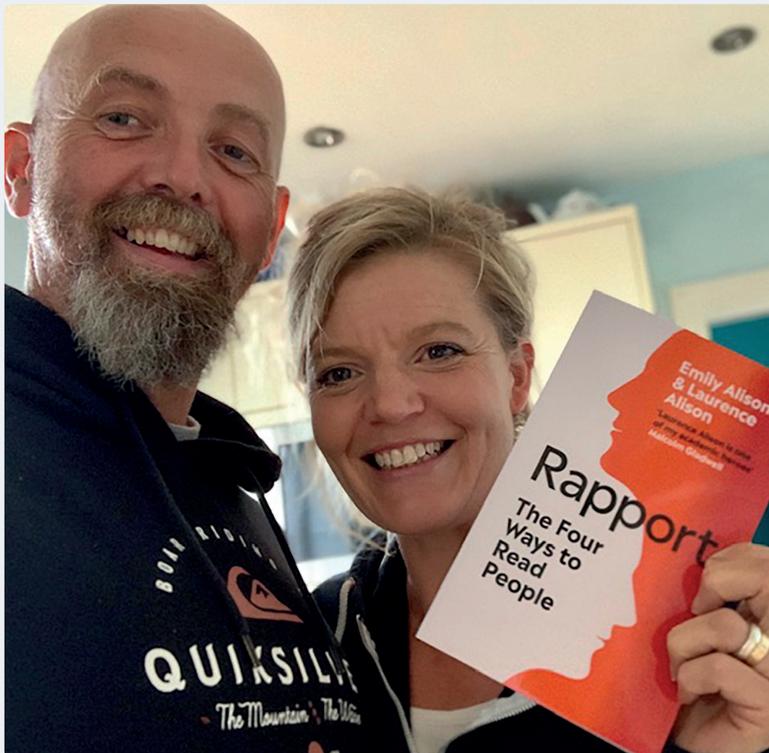
**What has changed in the world of interrogation?**

*Laurence:* Well, straight away we would change the term to the world of ‘interviewing’. Interrogation has an immediate association with adversarial questioning (at least in UK Law enforcement). What we have known since the introduction of The Police And Criminal Evidence (PACE) Act to UK police interviewing is that combative, coercive and manipulative strategies have no place in the interview room. Similarly, in the US and in the wake of 911 there were appalling acts of dehumanisation and torture conducted at hands of some US interrogators (aided and assisted by some US psychologists).

*Emily:* Not only are these approaches morally repugnant, unethical and fraught with legal issues, they are also ineffective. If what you are seeking is the truth, elite effective interviewers know that rapport is the only approach that works. Our job was to pin down exactly those aspects of communication that make up rapport. Since our specific work in this area on suspect interviewing we have shown how it is much more effective to try and understand the other person and take their perspective, rather than judge them or have any preconceived ideas or assumptions about their involvement. Police have generally been receptive to these ideas and have seen them work first-hand.

**What still needs to change? What stands in the way of the ‘rapport revolution’?**

*Emily:* Twitter! In all seriousness, we are in a time where conflict seems to be both promoted and applauded – by the media, by politicians, by the public, and even by social media algorithms. Shouting down and bullying your opposition seems to have replaced rational debate and critical thinking. Rapport building, at its heart, requires objectivity, curiosity, a desire to understand others, and,



most of all, the ability to listen. These are becoming lost skills that we need to recapture in how we speak to others. Arguments now seem to become increasingly binary – leave-remain, mask-no mask, catastrophe-scaremongering. There is so little effort to find nuance or subtlety in anything, nor to think objectively and seek another perspective. There seems to be more interest in conflict than compassion, and eagerness to divide rather than connect.

**How did you find the writing process, as a couple?**

*Laurence:* Writing a popular general consumption book is tough... whether alone or as a couple. You have to balance the science with the message and make it lively and successful as a narrative. Combining all that with what is actually a complex model is tricky and took time.

**Did you use your own advice in managing that?**

*Emily:* Of course! Our main aim was not to appeal to an academic audience but a very wide non-specialist one. With that in mind you have to ignore any urge to talk about the method, design or rigour of any of the studies, nor even justify any of the claims. The objective is to present what is known in a way that will keep the reader turning the pages and getting the basics of the model right. It has to be easy to digest and have a very wide appeal. That means everyone from a young adult seeking a romantic partnership, to a CEO having to give a member of staff bad news, has to be able to get something out of it. We had to be constantly mindful of the breadth of the audience in order that we didn't leave anyone out.

**In your experience, are psychologists any better or worse than other groups at building rapport in their professional and personal lives?**

*Laurence:* As in any profession there is huge variation. In some ways it's bewildering that psychologists don't apply their research more. We know a lot about communicating and deciding... two key features we all have to do every day, sometimes several times a day. We do see some psychologists that are bad at both! However, psychologists are often in the business of analysing people, so I think it gives them a leg up on how they view the world and the significance of interactions with others. But again, and I think we point this out in the book, we both admit to making many mistakes ourselves. You can't get things right all the time and maybe not even most of the time. Fatigue, stress, time pressure all get in the way. But if you do have some knowledge of these things then you can plan ahead for tricky conversations, or repair things if they've gone awry.

**Which of the lessons in your book has the firmest foundations, in terms of research evidence? And does that relate to how easy or effective it is in implementation?**

*Emily:* There are now very many studies of motivational interviewing, including a fair number of decent meta analyses. Stephen Rollnick has been very complimentary about our work and he has been an inspiration to us. Part of our model draws heavily on the concepts that underpin

that therapeutic approach... authenticity of the interaction, the provision of personal choice for the client and a non-judgmental sense of professional curiosity. These seem to be critical in police interviews with suspects in order to successfully gain information. However, we are finding they are fundamental principles of how we all connect with one another, regardless of the relationship or the context.

**Do those concepts have an important flipside?**

*Emily:* Yes – we also need to recognise the even more powerful negative effects of the opposite aspects of these principles, such as manipulation and deception, force and coercion and judgement and bias. If anything the key and overwhelming message is to stop any of these negative attributes as far as possible. They have an asymmetric negative effect on connecting with others so whilst it isn't possible to avoid ever going wrong, recognise when you do and make efforts to repair it.

*Laurence:* Interpersonal skills can be a hard thing to train people in. It's something people often consider innate – you're either good at it or not. However, our challenge has been to take quite a complex model and distil it into a format that is understandable and trainable for anyone. For example, Emily has been training parents and children in the circumplex structure by animal type (Conflict: T-Rex, Cooperation: Monkey, Control: Lion, Capitulation: Mouse) for 20 years. The animal archetypes allow children as young as five to understand the backbone of communication styles (what sort of animal is mummy most of the time? What sort of animal are you?). The message is about understanding what you are already good at and then focusing effort on improving those areas that don't come naturally.

**Tell me about Project ARES.**

*Laurence:* It has drawn on some of the concepts in *Rapport*. For Project ARES ([www.liverpool.ac.uk/project-ares/](http://www.liverpool.ac.uk/project-ares/)) I was very fortunate in pulling together a small team (some from Liverpool Uni as well as contacts I had elsewhere amongst the emergency services and defence) to provide online support for the response to Covid. This included folk in the ICU as well as people working in residential care, the morgues, paramedics and so on. The team were able to pull together practical tools based on the research as well as extensive experience of working for very long durations in extreme environments. Part of that requires effective communication skills, reading situations accurately and making connections that enable teams to work under intense pressure.

But there are also very clear decision-making elements that emerge in these environments. My other area of research involves the examination of how we make hard choices and select between least worst options. Often, decision makers revert to various forms of inertia when presented with these extreme environments. I've been fortunate insofar as, due to the success of *Rapport*, I've secured another contract with Penguin that will focus on that and on how we can push past sluggish decision making. The working title is 'Decisions, Decisions'.

**Transcend:  
The New  
Science of Self-  
Actualization**  
Scott Barry  
Kaufman  
TarcherPerigree

## Transcending Maslow's pyramid

The humanistic notion of self-actualization is a cornerstone of psychological syllabi, permeating broader social discussions about the contribution of psychological theory to human flourishing. Psychologists will immediately recall Abraham Maslow's pyramid – the hierarchy of needs. The model, as presented in textbooks, suggests that we must achieve particular clusters of human need (e.g., physiological needs, then safety, and then belonging) sequentially, to achieve a state of self-actualization.

In his new book, *Transcend: The New Science of Self-Actualization*, humanistic psychologist Scott Barry Kaufman presents a bold and creative revision of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, containing insights from social and personality psychology, positive psychology, organisational psychology and beyond. His text begins with a revelation that shatters the very foundations on which popular perceptions of Maslow's theory sit – Maslow never actually presented the hierarchy of needs as a pyramid. This was a creation of management consultants trying to sell a particular interpretation of the model, and misrepresents Maslow's view of the ultimate goal in life.

Above self-actualization, which has selfish connotations, is self-transcendence. According to Maslow's private and unpublished writings, transcending the self and having a broader sense of purpose and connection to others, is the peak of human experience.

In *Transcend*, Kaufman uses two metaphors to

juxtapose the established view of the hierarchy of needs against his reimagining of the theory. The orthodox model operates like a video game – people 'level up' in life by unlocking the door from one layer of needs to the next. Maslow's conceptualization was that each cluster of needs is interdependent and experienced simultaneously. The hierarchy should be viewed in an integrated way. That is, each cluster of needs rests upon each other, and 'regression' to lower levels of needs (or, perhaps more accurately, experiencing the increased salience of more basic existential needs) is not a strictly pathological process.

This integration means that basic needs pertaining to physiological health and physical safety form the basis of higher need fulfilment. That is, the accomplishment of esteem needs is necessarily dependent upon the experience of physical safety, or connectedness to others, as these offer a foundation for approaching new opportunities and reaching one's fullest potential and to transcend the self.

Kaufman presents a new metaphor to represent Maslow's model of self-actualization. He suggests that human existence operates more like a sailing boat navigating the ocean. The base of the boat is comprised of lower-order needs – those where deficiency leads to psychosocial functioning difficulties, such as safety, belonging and esteem. Having some of these needs will protect against the oceanwater, but the bigger your boat (the better you achieve these basic needs), the more

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## 'I want to create solutions'

Shasta Sheyenne Stephens with 'two books that shaped me'



Shasta Sheyenne Stephens is a student at Manchester Metropolitan University.

I don't think I've been the same since I picked up *Why We Sleep: The New Science of Sleep and Dreams* by Matthew Walker. I have suffered with insomnia for most of my life, and thanks to this book I now feel better able to understand my experiences with mental and physical health in relation to sleep.

This book was, for me, a lot more than a few great tips on how to sleep better. It was an exciting introduction to the science of sleep. There is so much more research to be done on the benefits of sleep and I would love to take on some of that research and bring it into practice to help others. Although Walker has come under fire for 'data manipulation' and 'scientific errors', what I took away from the book is the serious potential for sleep science to really help people. I want to raise awareness and educate others on what is really

happening while we're asleep and how it can help us.

Stephen Hawking's *Brief Answers to the Big Questions* is not a psychology book, but it really gets you thinking about life and what we're meant to be doing with it. This book completely humbled me, reminding me that we are accidents created by the universe. I am by nature very caring and empathetic. Being reminded that we (humans) are all we've got, further solidified my desire to care for others and create a better world for future generations, because it's not going to happen on its own. This book confirmed for me that as long as I'm using our knowledge to attempt to relieve suffering, then I'm doing something purposeful with my life.

*Why We Sleep* and *Brief Answers to the Big Questions* have both re-inspired me and reminded me why

I wanted to pursue psychology in the first place – to understand my own struggles with mental health, which has led to my passion for helping others. I want to know why our brains work the way they do, especially when they act in ways that are not beneficial for us or our survival, such as disorders like insomnia and anxiety. I want to create solutions! Asking questions is so important, particularly in today's climate – we need to pursue the truth.

[Read Shasta's full reflection in the online version.](#)

[We'd love to feature more psychologists on 'a book that shaped me'. Please get in touch with your idea on \[psychologist@bpps.org.uk\]\(mailto:psychologist@bpps.org.uk\).](#)

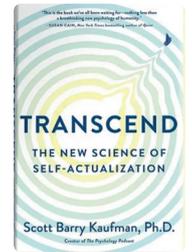
ferocious the waves of life you can withstand.

While these basic needs protect against emotional turmoil, they provide only a basis for human flourishing. Achieving a secure base provides confidence to explore the ocean (a metaphor for the social world) in search of peak experiences. According to Kaufman's boat analogy, people do this by opening their sails, which are comprised of Maslow's growth needs pertaining to needs for exploration (discovery), love and purpose in life. These higher needs offer a guide to life. There are striking links to other texts on how happiness can be found through the establishment of a broader meaning for one's life (such as Viktor Frankl in *Man's Search for Meaning*). Perhaps most poignantly, Maslow is quoted in the section of the book examining 'purpose':

'Happiness is an epiphenomenon. A by-product. Something not to be sought directly, but an indirect reward for virtue.'

Throughout, Kaufman provides lively examples, links to classic and contemporary literature, and, if you listen to the audiobook as I did, the inquisitive enthusiasm that is a trademark of his podcast interviews. This book is a must-read for anybody interested in understanding how and why finding a greater meaning in life is important, and the importance of self-transcendence in an age

**Reviewed by Craig Harper**, Senior Lecturer at Nottingham Trent University

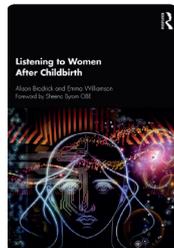


## How does birth trauma affect women?

*Listening to Women After Childbirth* helps us think about the links between women's birth experiences and mental distress. This well-researched book strikes a balance between research and clinical case studies which help to connect the reader to the emotion of the issues involved, bringing the book to life. Attention is paid to the experiences of partners attending the birth and of staff who work in this area, who may also suffer from traumatic responses. The main focus of the book is on supporting those who have been traumatised by the process of giving birth, but it isn't so much a 'therapy' book. Rather, it provides a range of information on how best to support women who have been negatively affected by a birth experience, with guidance on how to develop appropriate services to support them and their partners.

I found it interesting to read about the Birth Afterthoughts model – a stepped care approach in which midwives typically offer an opportunity for women to discuss their birth experience in the first few days and weeks (with the aim of 'defusing' distress). Then if women or partners want a more detailed discussion of the events around the birth, they self-refer to a Birth Afterthoughts service. This service tends to be midwife led, using a counselling model to help clients to process their experience, whilst

**Listening to Women After Childbirth**  
Alison Brodrick & Emma Williamson  
Routledge;  
£32.99



providing screening guidance for PTSD and other post-birth mental health problems. Clients who need more specialised help can then be referred to appropriate services.

Fear of childbirth is also addressed, particularly for women who have had a previous traumatic birth experience and who are fearful about giving birth in the future. The authors work with clients using a predominantly cognitive behavioural approach and illustrate how this can be used by clinicians to help their clients.

The book provides a useful chapter on therapeutic interventions that may form part of a Birth Trauma service. At present, the current research is focused on EMDR, trauma-focused CBT and compassion-focused therapy. As this area is developing, it will be interesting to see if other therapeutic approaches such as CAT (Cognitive Analytic Therapy) or schema therapy could also be a helpful way of supporting clients who present with complex cases.

The penultimate chapter centres on how to support midwifery staff who may have experienced workplace trauma. The authors explore framing staff support using a self-compassion model and advocate for regular restorative clinical supervision. The aim of this is to offer a safe space for staff to reflect on what they experienced and to help them to emotionally process the demands that their role can place on them. This approach has been shown to reduce stress and burn out for staff who work in maternity services. The final chapter looks at using the narratives and understanding gained from Birth Afterthoughts sessions to facilitate reflection, offering ideas for staff training.

I enjoyed reading this book. It provides helpful information on how to integrate psychological services into maternal and post-natal care, which I feel is immensely important for women and their families.

**Reviewed by Dr Kate Redman**, Chartered Clinical Psychologist, NHS

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