REVIEW OF *THE SCIENCE OF TRUST*

I read this a few months ago but I didn't get many clear takeaways from it. That may well be my fault rather than the book's. But the only thing that really stuck with me was the impression that the book spent way more time talking about the history of game theory than I was expecting. Anyway, here's a grab-bag of interesting bits.

1. This finding definitely plays to my biases:

> …**neutral affect is a good thing during conflict**.[1]

> …couple therapists should work toward moving couples into a less emotional exchange during conflict, not just on getting them out of the nasty-nasty cell of the matrix or on increasing positive affect.[2]

(Reining in one's emotions during an argument can be difficult and I don't think any of us can expect to succeed all the time, but sometimes it seems like our culture denies that there's value in even making the effort.)

2. How a successful relationship can naturally drive itself toward the situations that will endanger it:

> …In the beginning years of a new relationship, couples work to see if they can trust each other in various areas of their lives. They are setting up a secure relationship as a base for building a life together.

> Once they have established this security, they work harder, or they decide to remodel the kitchen, or they decide to change jobs, or they decide to have a baby. In fact, with regard to the decision to have the first baby, it was the newlyweds who were doing better in their marriages who "progressed" to that decision.

> …

> The overall life pattern is that **people in our culture continually increase complexity in their lives until many live at what mathematicians call the "cusp of a catastrophe."** That word "catastrophe" doesn't mean disaster; rather, it has a precise meaning for mathematicians. A catastrophe state means that people keep slowly increasing the complexity of their lives until they are at risk for entering a new qualitative state. Mathematically, catastrophe means that small increases in a parameter (like complexity, or stress) can suddenly, once a precise threshold of stress is passed, completely alter the qualitative nature of their relationship.[3]

3. On the importance of taking breaks to deal with **flooding**:

> We now know that taking breaks and creating a way of saying, "Stop, I'm flooded," is very important for couples. Nothing else will do. Couples who are in a nasty-nasty interchange have to stop talking immediately when one person claims to be flooded and asks for a break….

> …The break must be at least 20 minutes long… [b]ecause of the slow decay of [certain] neurotransmitters…

Also, it cannot be a break that gives people time to rehearse "distress maintaining" thoughts like, "I don't have to take this" or "I'm going to get even." It must be truly relaxing, like a pleasant walk around the block. That's not an easy thing to accomplish.

…People need to…schedule a precise time to get together again so the request for a break doesn't seem like an excuse for avoiding the issue or avoiding the partner.[4]

4. Summarizing a result from Schwartz & Russek 1998:

Ninety-one percent of participants who did not have a warm relationship with their mothers were diagnosed with a serious medical disease in midlife, compared to only 45% who said they did have a warm relationship with their mothers.[5]

5. I think this comment, suggesting that a sense of responsibility for another person's state of mind can *inhibit* us from accurately understanding their state of mind, is insightful:

Somewhat counterintuitively, understanding is facilitated by taking no responsibility for the partner's feelings, except trying to understand. When one's partner is crying, for example, the response should not be, "Please stop crying," but something like, "Please help me understand what the tears are all about." The goal is understanding, and that is enough.[6]

6. Another suggestion which plays to my biases:

Another very important principle in Rapoport's theory is that to make conflict safe, **we first need to *postpone persuasion* until each person can state the partner's position to the partner's satisfaction**.[7]

7. A hard but plausible piece of advice:

No one can listen nondefensively to a perceived attack. The speaker cannot begin expressing negative affect with blaming or criticism. There appears to be **no such thing as "constructive criticism."** Instead, the speaker must state his or her feelings as neutrally as possible, and then convert any complaint about his or her partner into a positive need.[8]

8. Gottman is definitely selling me on this guy:

Hence, Rapoport suggested two things. First, when we identify a negative quality in our partner (or adversary), we **try to see that very quality in ourselves**. That is a truly amazing suggestion. Second, he suggested that when we identify a positive quality in ourselves, we try to see that very quality in our partner (or adversary). Another truly amazing suggestion.[9]

9. Gottman directly pushes back against one popular relationship-advice book—Esther Perel's *Mating in Captivity*:

The Perel hypothesis is that boundaries between people and emotional distance create great sex and intimacy. The alternative hypothesis, which I favor, is that emotional attunement creates intimate trust and makes intimacy personal.[10]

10. I find the first part of this to be easy to believe but hard to accept:

When we compare cognitively based repairs that appeal to logic and rational problem solving, we must generally conclude that these repair attempts are quite ineffective. However, repair attempts that are based on increasing emotional closeness (taking responsibility, agreement, affection, humor, self-disclosure, understanding and empathy, and "we're okay") were highly effective.[11]

11. This sucks:

> Harvard professor Robert Weiss's classic book, *Staying the Course*, qualitatively analyzed the relationships of 100 successful men. He reported that these couples had about two serious arguments a year. Furthermore, he reported that, after an argument, women generally said that even though it was an unpleasant experience, it was constructive because issues became raised and were now out on the table. In contrast, most of the men had serious thoughts of leaving the relationship after the same argument.[12]

12. Bad news for the Internet era:

> Habitual pornography use promotes unfavorable CL-ALT comparisons and supports denigrating rather than cherishing the partner.[13]

Gottman also refers to a book called *The Porn Trap* and summarizes an interesting claim it makes:

> Some images are highly disappointing but some are very exciting and surprising, so the hunt continues, resulting in the porn user being on a **variable ratio schedule of reinforcement**, which is highly resistant to extinction.[14]

1. John Mordechai Gottman, *The Science of Trust: Emotional Attunement for Couples*, 1st ed (New York: W.W. Norton, 2011), 64, emphasis added.

2. Ibid., 66.

3. Ibid., 76–77, emphasis added.

4. Ibid., 125–26.

5. Ibid., 144.

6. Ibid., 194.

7. Ibid., 219, bold added, italics in original.

8. Ibid., 219–20, emphasis added.

9. Ibid., 249, emphasis added.

10. Ibid., 253.

11. Ibid., 282.

12. Ibid., 349.

13. Ibid., 387.

14. Ibid., emphasis added.