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Intimate Relationships

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Rowland S. & Perlman Miller, *Intimate Relationships, 5th Edition* (McGraw Hill, 2009).

Echoing the fathers of the Second Vatican Council, Pope John Paul II offered both warm praise and stern warnings about modern psychology on several occasions. He saw the great value of modern psychological science in contributing to man's self-understanding and helping to alleviate human suffering. However, he also warned of accepting psychological theory without thoroughly investigating it from the standpoint of Catholic anthropology. Failure to do so can result in people being led away from the Truth and into greater confusion about who man is and how he is to live. Yet, the Pope taught that bringing psychological science and Catholic anthropology together can result in a "complete and thus realistic vision of humans."

One of the most exciting contributions of psychology in recent decades is the scientific study of human relationships. Starting with such pioneers as Harry Harlow and John Bowlby, psychologists have undertaken countless systematic studies of how various relational experiences affect the parties involved, the qualities and factors that promote healthy relationships, and those that lead to deteriorating ones. Miller and Perlman's *Intimate Relationships* represents a useful, current synthesis of the portion of this research dealing with adults.

Miller and Perlman emphasize that human beings have a basic need to belong. They argue that we are a social species, and individuals and communities are more likely to flourish in the presence of close, meaningful relationships. They show on the basis of scientific research that human beings handle stress better, are physically healthier, and emotionally happier when they are supported by trusted friends and/or a loving romantic partner. They similarly show how social rejection, loneliness, and shyness can wound us in all of these areas. Indeed, being rejected or rebuffed by important people seems to activate some of the same circuitry in the brain related to physical pain. Broken relationships hurt! Similarly, people who are lonely or isolated tend to have higher blood pressure, more stress hormones circulating in their blood, and poorer functioning immune systems. All of this brings to light once again the word of God in the book of Genesis: It is not good for man to be alone (cf. Gen 2:17).

These findings are especially disconcerting in light of certain cultural trends. The rise in divorce rates is well known. What is less well known is that despite being in the age of social media, research cited by Miller and Perlman suggests that, as a society, we are becoming less, not more, intimately connected with others. Data from a nationally representative sample show that the percentage of American adults who report having *no close confidant* of any sort more than doubled from 10 percent in 1985 to 25 percent in 2004. During that same time period the average number of intimate relationships reported by American adults decreased from three to two. It seems that all the technology at our fingertips is not much help in satisfying the need for love.

When committed, intimate relationships break up, people suffer as a result. There is no clearer example of this than divorce, which the research suggests is a major setback for all involved. While the initiating spouse may feel some relief as he/she escapes from an unhappy relationship, average well-being scores after a divorce never reach the levels they were before the trouble began. In general, both spouses tend to suffer in significant ways, though to varying degrees, in many areas of life after a divorce. Even more, the children of divorce clearly lose out. Here Miller and Perlman are quite clear: "The verdict is in. Decades of research involving hundreds of thousands of people converge on the conclusion that, compared to those whose parents stay married, children whose parents divorce exhibit lower levels of well-being both as adolescents and as young adults" (p. 415). They go on to discuss these detrimental effects on emotional well-being, behavior, academic performance, and future relationships.

Miller and Perlman's book is also helpful in pointing out research-supported ways we can strengthen our close relationships. In addition to carrying positive yet realistic expectations of our relationships and engaging in attuned, empathic communication, they mention such admirable qualities as being willing to make sacrifices, supporting each other's personal growth, patiently tolerating each other's bad moods, finding ways to be playful together, and practicing forgiveness when we are hurt. When our marriages or intimate partnerships become especially strained, Miller and Perlman encourage their readers to consider therapy, providing helpful descriptions of several of the leading styles of marital therapy and offering some guidance on how to find a competent provider.

Despite all the interesting findings from relationship science presented by these authors, there are some significant problems with their text as well. First, they tend to minimize the differences between men and women, attributing the majority of such differences to unhealthy cultural values. There is also a strong bias that recurs throughout the book equating same-sex couples with heterosexual couples. Miller and Perlman selectively present research findings to support the equality of these two types of relationships and also try to argue from the authority of the scientific community for social change in this regard. Former president of the American Psychological Association Martin Seligman has characterized the role of the social scientist as one of *describing* not *prescribing*. Miller and Perlman seem to have no difficulty occasionally straying from this dictum, lapsing into advocacy and sometimes even directly trying to change their reader's behavior, as if being a scientist conferred moral authority. One area in which this occurs is their frequent repetition in the text of the "safe sex" mantra. These authors deny the effectiveness of abstinence education and fail to adequately address the moral and cultural value of chastity. Rather they repeat again and again the need to use condoms. Apparently they are unconcerned for how such a recommendation may affect readers who hold religious or moral beliefs that contradict their directives.

Like so much of what is found in the contemporary psychological literature, there is much of value in *Intimate Relationships*. The research findings are at times fascinating, curious, and challenging. Miller and Perlman's presentation is engaging and readable helping to make what could be dry details more lively. One cannot come away from reading this book without feeling a little stronger in self-knowledge and wiser regarding what makes relationships succeed or fail. Nonetheless, as John Paul II warned, one has to sift the good from the bad in order to unite the truths of science with the truths of faith. This is a delicate task that sometimes requires a deeper investigation into the research literature than can be conveyed in a textbook like *Intimate Relationships* and a thoughtful analysis of the researchers' presuppositions. Thus, in the end, the well-prepared reader will find harmonies of Truth in Miller and Perlman's work while the novice may need assistance to keep from straying off key.

