



Book Review

Peeking Inside the Relationship Mind

By

Mark R. Leary

A review of *The New Science of Intimate Relationships* by Garth Fletcher. Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, 2002.

People have long been interested in the complexities of intimate relationships—both their own and other people’s—but for the first few millennia of recorded history, the exploration of close relationships was left largely to poets, playwrights, philosophers, and, occasionally, physicians. Even once researchers began to use scientific methods to study human behavior late in the 19th century, psychologists, sociologists, and other behavioral scientists largely ignored close relationships. In this scholarly vacuum, pop psychology flourished, offering analyses of and solutions for people’s relationship difficulties that were often as superficial as they were uninformed. The past 20 years has seen a dramatic change in the intellectual landscape, however, as documented by *The New Science of Intimate Relationships* by Garth Fletcher. This book may not unseat the pop psychologists who dominate television talk-shows or empty the self-help sections of bookstores, but it may begin to reverse the trend by providing a responsible, readable overview of

scholarly work on love, sex, and other aspects of people’s closest relationships.

Fletcher’s focus is on the “intimate relationship mind”—the ways in which people process information about their intimate relationships and how their thoughts and emotions relate to how they behave in their most intimate relationships. In tackling this task, Fletcher melds social psychology (the domain of behavioral science that studies interpersonal influences on thought, emotion, and behavior) and evolutionary psychology (the domain that attempts to understand the adaptive functions of fundamental aspects of human nature), with some developmental and clinical psychology thrown in for good measure. As an active scholar with a foot in both social and evolutionary psychology, he blends these areas in a balanced and careful manner, examining the interacting influences of “nature” and “nurture” with all of the appropriate caveats.

Fletcher begins the book with an insider’s view of the scientific process, particularly as it

relates to the study of close relationships. Although this tack may turn off readers who are eager to jump into the juicy details about love and sex in the opening chapter, it seems essential to Fletcher's goal of helping us separate the wheat from the chaff when evaluating both researchers and media pundits who make this or that claim about personal relationships. If we are to free the public from the grasp of pop psychologists who offer personal opinion as scientific fact, we must educate them regarding how science works and show them how to identify unsubstantiated claims.

After laying out the assumptions and theoretical underpinnings of evolutionary psychology, particularly as they apply to intimate relationships, the author then takes us through analyses of love, marriage, extramarital relationships, communication, intimacy, passion, attachment, mate selection, sex, jealousy, and relationship aggression. For each topic, he integrates evolutionary and social psychological perspectives to offer a fascinating and comprehensive picture of how the intimate relationship minds work and, perhaps most intriguingly, why people's intimate relationships are filled with so much unhappiness, anger, and turmoil. Along the way, Fletcher critically evaluates the evidence, warning us when accepted wisdom is not borne out by the facts.

For many readers, the extensive sections that deal with differences in how men and women approach intimate relationships will be the most interesting and, perhaps, provocative parts of the book. It is here that the evolutionary psychologists have most strongly butted heads with mainstream psychologists (as well as other scholars). Evolutionary psychologists propose that many differences between men and women are due, at least in part, to the fact that men and women were under different evolutionary pressures during the prehistoric past. So, for example, if men and women differ in how they select

mates, approach sexuality, and react to infidelity, it is because different strategies promoted survival and reproduction for men and women in the ancestral environment. The fact that these sex differences make little sense (and may even be dysfunctional) today simply shows that our modern environment is quite different than the one in which these sex-linked strategies evolved. Critics of evolutionary psychology bristle over the notion that sex differences in behavior are evolved adaptations, suggesting that such claims imply that men and women can't help but to succumb to their innate dispositions and, thus, can't be held accountable for relationship misbehaviors. Fletcher patiently takes us through the evolutionary and anti-evolutionary arguments, arriving at what to me (an admitted proponent of the evolutionary perspective) is a balanced conclusion that gives both evolution and society their due.

The New Science of Intimate Relationships is a bold attempt to cover the landscape in a way that will appeal to lay readers, students, and researchers alike. Overall, Fletcher does a good job walking the fine line among these audiences. Understandably, he must occasionally lapse into topics that are aimed primarily at one or another of these constituencies and, at those times, some readers may get the strong sense that he has taken a side street and, just for the moment, is not writing for them. If they will bear with him for a page or two, however, Fletcher will be back on the main highway where all readers will gain insights into their intimate relationship minds.

Mark R. Leary, Ph.D., Professor and Chair, Department of Psychology, Wake Forest University, 415 Greene Hall, P.O. Box 7778 Reynolda Station, Winston-Salem, NC 27109, USA. Email: leary@wfu.edu.