Chapter Sixteen

An Evolutionary-Psychological Approach to Self-esteem: Multiple Domains and Multiple Functions

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Evolutionary Perspectives on Self-evaluation and Self-esteem

Perhaps more ink has been devoted to the issue of self-esteem—loosely, the degree to which we evaluate ourselves positively or negatively—than to any other single topic in psychology. Self-esteem has been defined in a variety of ways and been analyzed into any number of constellations of dimensions, types, and subtypes. It has been recurrently implicated in phenomena of considerable psychological and social importance, from prejudice, aggression, and criminality to mood disorders, eating disorders, and other serious mental health problems. Much research focuses on perceived abilities and competence, while other research focuses on interpersonal relations, physical attractiveness, or perceived control over outcomes. Some scholars focus on defense and maintenance of self-esteem; others on its enhancement. Virtually every major psychological theory touches on the issue in some way, and the need to maintain and enhance self-esteem is widely assumed to be a fundamental human motive (Leary & Downs, 1995).

What is sorely needed is a deeper, overarching theoretical framework to bring order to this fragmented literature, to organize future research, and to provide a solid basis for applications of this knowledge in the real world. In this chapter we endeavor to show that the emerging paradigm of evolutionary psychology (Buss, 1995, 1999; Symons, 1987; Tooby & Cosmides, 1992) offers a powerful metatheoretical framework for doing so. We do not aspire, in this brief chapter, to develop a comprehensive theory of self-esteem. Our

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