



When Culture and Biology Collide: Why We are Stressed, Depressed, and Self-Obsessed

Professor E. O. Smith

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Why do we do things that we *know* are bad for us? Why do we line up to buy greasy fast food that is terrible for our bodies? Why do we take the potentially lethal risk of cosmetic surgery to have a smaller nose, bigger lips, or a less wrinkled face? Why do we risk life and limb in a fit of road rage to seek revenge against someone who merely cut us off in traffic? If these life choices are simply responses to cultural norms and pressures, then *why* did these particularly self-destructive patterns evolve in place of more sensible ones?

In *When Culture and Biology Collide*, E. O. Smith explores various aspects of behavior that are endemic to contemporary Western society, and proposes new ways of understanding and addressing these problems. Our physiology and behavior are the products of thousands of generations of evolutionary history. Every day we play out behaviors that have been part of the human experience for a very long time, yet these behaviors are played out in an arena that is far different from that in which they evolved. Smith argues that this discordance between behavior and environment sets up conditions in which there can be real conflict between our evolved psychological predispositions and the dictates of culture.

Topics such as drug abuse, depression, beauty and self-image, obesity and dieting, stress and violence, ethnic diversity, and welfare are all used as sample case studies. As with all of his case studies, Smith emphasizes the importance of not using an evolutionary explanation as an excuse for a particular pattern of behavior. Instead, he seeks to offer a perspective that will help us see ourselves more clearly and that may be useful in developing intelligent solutions to seemingly intractable problems. Smith provides ways of developing strategies for minimizing our self-destructive tendencies.

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