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# THE “WHITE MALE SYSTEM”

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In her efforts to understand and work with women clients, psychotherapist Anne Wilson Schaeff offers a *systems* view of patriarchy. In it she identifies what she calls the White Male System. It is crucial to be able to define this system and deal with it simply because it surrounds us and permeates our lives. Its myths, beliefs, rituals, procedures, and outcomes affect everything we think, feel, and do.

Schaeff describes the White Male System in this way: “It is the system in which we live, and in it, the power and influence are held by white males. It controls almost every aspect of our culture – it makes our laws, runs our economy, sets our salaries, decides when and if we go to war, decides what is knowledge and how it is to be taught.”

This system did not happen overnight; we all let it occur and participated in its development. Other systems which operate within it – black, Native American, female – are completely enveloped in and frequently overshadowed by it.

Nevertheless, the White Male System is just that: a system. We all live in it, but it is not reality. It is not the way the world is. Like any other system, it has both positive and negative qualities. But, because it is only a system, it can be clarified, examined, and changed, both from within and without.

## **The Four Great Myths of the White Male System:**

The White Male System has four myths that feed it, sustain it, and (theoretically at least) justify it. These myths have been around for so long that most men are not even conscious of them. To challenge or doubt them is akin to heresy: they are sacred givens.

**Myth #1:** *the White Male System is the only thing that exists.* It is the only valid way to see the world. Anything different must be discounted, disparaged, or destroyed. Beliefs and perceptions of other systems (especially female) are seen as sick, bad, crazy, stupid, ugly and incompetent. This myth is damaging in two ways – it limits women who want to explore their own perceptions and abilities and it limits men who want to experience and learn from them. The White Male System is *not* reality. It is a reality, but it is not *the* reality.

**Myth #2:** *the White Male System is innately superior.* (Note that the first and second myths do not follow logically. If the White Male System is the only thing that exists, then how can it be superior and to what?). Anyone who does not belong to this system is by definition inferior – all racial groups, women, and the few white men who don’t fit into it. According to the White Male System, innate superiority and innate inferiority are birthrights which cannot be earned or traded away. Some men would like to give their innate superiority away – it is a heavy burden to bear; always being “the best” is not good for one’s health.

**Myth #3:** *the White Male System knows and understands everything.* This is one reason why women so frequently look to men for advice and direction. Both sexes genuinely believe that men should and do know it all. This myth is directly related to racial and sex-role stereotyping. A stereotype is no more than a definition of one group of persons by another who wishes to control it. Taken together, stereotypes support the myths of the White Male System. As long as the members of these groups go along with the stereotypes, they support the illusion that the White Male System knows and understands everything. If men say women are weak and women behave as if they are weak, then who can argue with the myth? Blacks were the first to defy such stereotypes and start living in their own system. The other racial groups and women have done this to a certain extent as well, but at considerable personal expense and threat to their existence.

**Myth #4:** *it is possible to be totally logical, rational and objective.* The problem with this myth is that one must constantly do battle with the ways in which one is not all of these things. One must continually overcome and deny any tendencies toward illogical, irrational, subjective, or intuitive thoughts or behaviors. Members of the White Male System spend a lot of time and energy telling women that females are by nature not logical, rational, or objective. Often they do so in highly emotional ways!

Living according to these myths can mean living in ignorance. For example, the only way to maintain the myth of knowing and understanding everything is to ignore a whole universe of other information. When one clings to the myth of innate superiority, one must constantly overlook the virtues and abilities of others.

Once we acknowledge that the White Male System is no more than the sum of its parts – and that those parts are open to question – we can begin to change it. We can begin to see other realities and viable options and learn to trust ourselves again.

*Excerpts and adaptations from “Women’s Reality: An Emerging Female System in a White Male Society” by Anne Wilson Schaeff; 1981*