There is a shared set of beliefs about human nature that shapes the way we see the world—common assumptions about race, aggression, and sex that are seen as just part of being human.

While we might not be quick to admit it in public, many of us believe there is a specific set of biological differences between groups of people in the world. Many also assume that if you strip away society and laws, humans become beasts, with survival of the fittest and the bigger, badder, more aggressive vying for control. And of course, nearly everyone knows that it is natural that men and women want, and need, different things from sex and personal relationships.

These beliefs are myths based on misinformation, partial truths, and a large dose of ignorance regarding what we know about our species. This book focuses on challenging what many people mistake for common knowledge about what it means to be human. Employing information from a wide range of researchers and research projects, we will bust these myths and replace them with more accurate stories about who we are, what we do, and why we do it.

So many of us equate specific concepts about race, sex, and aggression with common sense, largely because of the shared assumption that under the thin veneer of culture we have a basic set of instincts, a set of genetic predispositions, a raw humanity. There is a popular perception of what human nature is, and particular views of race, aggression, and sex permeate society. These can be encapsulated in three key myths:

1. Race: Humans are divided into biological races (Black, White, Asian, etc.).
2. Aggression: Removing cultural constraints reveals the violent beast within us (especially in men).

3. Sex: Men and women are truly different in behavior, desires, and internal wiring.

By the end of this book you will see that what we know about these topics demonstrates, unequivocally, that humans are not more naturally monogamous, aggressive, and violent than we are polygamous, peaceful, and egalitarian; that men and women are not nearly as different as one might think; and that even though humans are not divided into biological races, racism is real, has nefarious impacts, and matters for all humanity. Being human is a lot more complicated than many of us think, but myths about human nature are powerful and remain quite popular.

WHAT IS A MYTH?

If common sense is as much an interpretation of the immediacies of experience, a gloss on them, as are myth, painting, epistemology, or whatever, then it is, like them, historically constructed and, like them, subjected to historically defined standards of judgment. It can be questioned, disputed, affirmed, developed, formalized, contemplated, even taught, and it can vary dramatically from one people to the next. It is, in short, a cultural system, though not usually a very tightly integrated one, and it rests on the same basis that any other such system rests; the conviction by those whose possession it is of its value and validity. Here, as elsewhere, things are what you make of them.

CLIFFORD GEERTZ, anthropologist

In this book we are interested in myths as stories or explanations of why things are the way we think they are. They make up a part of what many of us would call common sense: the assumptions we all make about the world around us, especially about race, sex, and aggression. By helping us make sense of the behaviors we see around us and the symbols we use, the myths allow us to go on from day to day, appearing to understand our world without having to reanalyze, or critically analyze, every day’s situations.

For example, if someone makes a joke about women and shopping or a man reacts violently to a sports event, we “get” the joke because we have a built-in belief system that supports these myths: shopping is part of being...
female, and men “get all testosteroned out” over sports. And in all fairness, in both of these examples, there is some societal truth: many women do indeed like to shop, and some men do become aggressive at sporting events. It’s tempting to believe these examples thereby prove these traits are inherent in all human nature, but there are far more interesting phenomena at play. Too often in our society, people are quick to form a set of assumptions about someone they meet, based on which gender they fit into or what race they appear to be. It’s not that humans are naturally inclined to be sexist or racist, but rather that race and sex (and gender) hold great meaning in society, and with them is a whole suite of myths regarding what to expect and understand about individuals.

None of these reactions are necessarily conscious thoughts. Rather, the myths are so pervasive that these responses are perpetuated without any active consideration on our part. The myths provide explanations and contexts so that we don’t have to; they supply ready-made common sense. This does not mean that everything about our societal myths is untrue or that all such myths are wholly false. But the myths about race, aggression, and sex are particularly harmful.

Dictionaries define the word “myth” as a noun meaning a traditional story concerning the early history of a people or explaining a natural or social phenomenon, typically involving the supernatural; a widely held but false belief; or a fictitious person or thing. The principal definition tells us a myth is a popular but false way of explaining things. According to the philosopher Mary Midgely, “we are accustomed to think of myths as the opposite of science. But, in fact, they are a central part of it, the part that decides its significance in our lives. So we very much need to understand them. . . . They are imaginative patterns, networks of powerful symbols that suggest particular ways of interpreting the world.”

We usually differentiate information associated with science from other types of information. However, what we think of as scientific realities are often filled with myth. For example, scientists in the 1700s were convinced that humors (liquids in the body) could move around and change the body as needed. As such, the medical establishment treated patients “scientifically” with that myth as their starting point. Now we know that blood does move through the body and affects the health and status of the body, but not in the ways that doctors in the 1700s thought it did. Some aspect of reality (the circulation of blood) and a major component of myth (the power of the humors) worked together to create a baseline reality that was accepted
until other, more accurate information came along and was integrated into society’s (and science’s) myth structure. The myth of the humors has not left us totally. Think of how many times we use the term “bad blood” to refer to ill health or ill will between people, implying that the state of the blood (humor) is what is driving health and behavior.

We view this variety of myth as a far cry from Greek and Roman and Native American myths or broader religious and spiritual stories of people across the planet. However, there are many similarities between these myths and the myths that are the focus of this book. For example, the Greek myths were often explanations for natural phenomena. Take the myth of the Pillars of Hercules. At the Strait of Gibraltar (the narrow strait between southern Spain and northern Morocco that links the Mediterranean Sea with the Atlantic Ocean), two amazing, granite mini-mountains rise just off the coastline: the Rock of Gibraltar to the north and Jebel Musa to the south. In one version of the myth, Hercules has to cross a set of mountains; rather than climb over them, he uses his terrific strength to move them apart, joining the two seas as a result. Here the myth explains a striking aspect of the local geology. Myths also acted as lessons, guidelines, and justifications for how one should live one’s life. For example, the myth of Icarus (who flew too close to the sun with wings of wax despite his father’s warnings) is a parable about respect and attention to parents, about caution in risk-taking, and about the lure of the beautiful and prohibited. However, unlike these ancient Greek myths, the myths that concern us in this book are not about heroes, monsters, and mountains. They are the day-to-day beliefs we carry with us to explain, give reasons to, and help us navigate the world we come into contact with. Such myths about human nature can be potentially harmful to us as a society. These mythical ideas we share about humanity can affect the ways in which we behave toward and think about other people and set up expectations and assumptions about who we are as a species. There are many beliefs about why humans do what they do, but a number of these beliefs, as I point out in this book, are neither factual nor true.

Myths Have an Impact on the Way We Think and Feel

Our societal myths help us navigate our daily lives by providing handy basic assumptions about the goings-on around us; they help move our day along, even if subconsciously. When a man screams out in anger from a car stuck in traffic on the freeway, or a woman cries after her grocery bags tear and the
contents fall to the floor, we respond to what happened. But at the same time, we also have a ready-made explanation for a man's rapid turn to aggression or violence and the woman's emotional response. When we hear about a couple's breakup around infidelity, we tend to make assumptions about who, what, and where, based on our preconceptions about males and females. When a group of high school kids lines up to pick sides for a basketball game, assumptions are made about the abilities of the potential players based on the color of their skin and their racial and ethnic backgrounds. The same occurs when a teacher watches a class of mixed ethnicities, races, and genders sit down to take a standardized exam. We have expectations about behavior and potential based on both our life experiences and our myths about humanity. Together, our prior experiences and our shared myths act to build common sense or provide basic explanations for the world we live in and help shape that world and our behavior in it. Let's use two very simple examples to demonstrate these points, one from a myth we'll bust later in the book and another from a very popular set of myths about health, travel, and cures.

It is commonly assumed that men are loath to ask for directions, an assumption that has become the brunt of many jokes that persist because so many of us are participants in the myth about who men are. However, the myth is not really about asking for directions. It's about how we define and understand male biology and male nature. Inherent in this popular perception are assumptions about male gender: that men are proud, do-it-yourselfers, because it is masculine to be in charge and know your way around. These are important components of the gender-role definition for males in US culture (indeed, in many cultures). So at one level, the joke about men not asking for directions rests on a set of cultural expectations about how males should act, but this is not the myth. The myth is what underlies many of these cultural assumptions, the part that most people do not actively think about when laughing at the jokes about men and directions.

What really concerns us here is the myth of male nature that creates an evolutionary, or biological, story to support cultural expectations of masculinity. This myth involves the assumption that men have better spatial reasoning abilities than women, including innate mathematical abilities. This assumed ability suggests men are more likely to be able to navigate spatial problems (like getting from one place to another) by individual actions such as map reading, calculating distances, and imagining complex spatial layouts. Now, that some men may have superior spatial capability is not inaccurate, but such a fact is not the core of the myth. The real meat of the issue here is
our mythical explanation for *why* men might have these spatial abilities over women: man the hunter.

Most people would agree that in our past, humans relied heavily on hunting animals for food and hides and bones. Most would also agree that this hunting was done by men and not women. If this were truly the case, over time men would have become more biologically adept than women at the skills needed for hunting: spatial reasoning, tracking game, mentally mapping landscapes, and hand-eye coordination for making and using tools and weapons. It turns out that for the vast majority of human history (that is, the last two million years or so) we do not have good evidence for who had these skills (nothing one way or another), even though most researchers make the assumptions about men, hunting, tool use, and tool making. What we do know is that in most of the few remaining hunter/gatherer groups left on the planet that do hunt big game, men do the lion’s share of the big game hunting (even if women bring home a large portion of the actual calories eaten by the group in the form of gathered foods). However, substantive research (outlined in chapter 7) demonstrates that females did also hunt, and that contemporary divisions of labor may not reflect what gender/sex roles were like in the past. We have compelling evidence that over the last 6,000 to 10,000 years there was a pattern across many human societies of increasing differences between male and female roles in the acquisition and processing of food.

So, despite the myth that men evolved as hunters and tool users and makers, and women did something else (usually we think of them preparing the food and tending to babies), we don’t have any evidence that early men made more tools than early women (or even that there were any differences in who made which tools), or that one gender had more spatial knowledge of the areas used by the group. We know that in societies across the planet today there can be differences in the types of tools men and women make and use, and that there are widening differences in the use of living and working space as agriculture, industrialization, and economic stratification increase. We also have no evidence indicating who prepared the food in the past, but we do know that today preparation of food varies across cultures, with a majority of societies having women do much of the daily preparation work. We also have widely varied results from tests that measure male and female math and spatial abilities (though actually there is very little difference overall; see chapter 7), as well as from tests that measure hand-eye coordination, although men seem to be able to throw things a little better and farther. Still,