

Interview with Christine di Stefano

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Laura Liswood, Introduction: The basic notion within the book is about the Elephant and the Mouse. Non-dominant groups have developed a better sensory emotional intelligence than dominant groups. They, therefore, will know more about the dominant group (Same overview as other interviews).

Christine di Stefano: I think every thing you said to his point is absolutely right. That so many of these traits have to do with the position of subordination, rather than intricate characteristics of genders or race, whatever. And that is what we might call a social constructionist view. The idea is that intuition or cognitive proclivities are produced by social environments rather than emanating directly from genes or nature. These things are socially constructed as a result of positions people have in relationships—including personal, political, social relationships, etc.

And you can do a lot with the strengths of perspectives and orientations that are garnered from the subordinate positions, but you don't want to overdo it because there are liabilities. Some of those liabilities include adopting the identity of the victim and using a victim identity to make claims on behalf of oneself and one's group. And there is a woman political theorist who has done some interesting work on this and the tag phrase that she uses is 'wounded attachments;' the idea that you become so attached to them that you have to keep reiterating your victim status rather than moving beyond it. The name of this person is Wendy Brown and she has a collection of essays called *States of Injury*.

The other person I am thinking of who is relevant and more accessible is Richard Wright, the great novelist. He published a collection of essays that is now out of print called "White Man Listens." One of the things that Wright was interested in, and he wrote these in the 1950's when the Cold War was heating up, was the antagonism between the more developed and less developed. Wright was interested in exploring the psychology of envy that exists on the part of the 'have-nots' vis-à-vis the 'haves.' He called that the 'Frog Perspective.' Measuring yourself by the tape measure of established powerful leaders of the world and how that can lead to debilitating postures rather than empowering postures.

I am bringing up these two just to suggest that you think about some of the problems with the mouse perspective. Not to say there are not benefits with the mouse perspective. One of the major benefits you already mentioned. From the mouse perspective you have to understand the world of the elephant. And you have to be able to think strategically about what the elephant looks at the world. The elephant does not have to look at the world the way you do. There are strengths in that subordinate position. Hegel, the great philosopher, was onto this, though I am not telling you to read Hegel. But he has this great discussion of what he calls 'master slave consciousness.' What he basically suggests in the philosophy of spirit is that the slave is in a stronger position than the master. The slave has to understand the perspective of the master, but the master doesn't

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have to understand the perspective of the slave. But perversely the master relies on the slave for his very survival.

So these relationships are complicated. I think it is important to identify and tap into the strength of the subordinate position, but to also identify some of the liability.

Liswood: That does fit, because part of my message often is to non-dominant groups. And, particularly from a gender perspective, is this whole notion of how you create a sense of entitlement to lead. The downside of being a mouse is that you don't create that sense of entitlement.

di Stefano: There was an interesting short article from Institute for Women's Policy Research (IWPR) that I just read. It's a research brief called "6 Strategies that Encourage Women's Political Activism." You would be able to find it on the website. This study looked at efforts to encourage women's political activism through an interfaith initiative. They talked about the double whammy of women coming out of religious groups that tend to downgrade women's capacity for or entitlement to political leadership, but also how certain religious themes can help women to overcome those obstacles and some strategies to get women involved in leadership positions.

I think the layers of complexity that you would want to be thinking about is identifying strengths and liabilities that accompany each position. The strength of the elephant position is that sense of entitlement. That is one of the things that we do in New leadership; getting students to recognize that they already have a set of capacities and skills that they hadn't recognized as being an important part of leadership.

You probably know about this research that has compared women and men as potential candidates to run for elective office—

Liswood: Is this Richard Fox's work?

di Stefano: I can't put a name to it, it could be. The basic idea is that if you put a woman next to a man, and they have equal background, credentials, and everything else, the man will say, 'I'm ready to run for office' and the woman will say, 'I don't have enough credentials, I don't know enough, I don't have enough experience.' And if you put a woman and a man together and she has more expertise, chances are she will still say she is not qualified enough. That is related to the fundamental sense of entitlement, which I think is a characteristic of members of subordinate groups. Some of this has to do with what I call the Myth of Leadership. That it is this magical thing out there that some people believe that they have, whether or not they do. And other people will think they will never have. Some of that has to do with thinking it's a natural attribute rather than a learned set skill.

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Liswood: And somehow the elephant develops this sort of attributional part of himself that looks natural.

di Stefano: Exactly. And it convinces nearly everyone else until there is a huge disaster.

Liswood: And this is obviously the problem when the elephant is up against another elephant. In some ways they can't handle it because they haven't developed the skill set of scanning the environment for the changes.

di Stefano: Exactly, because they think they can control the environment.

Liswood: But my point is that, in and of themselves, elephant skill sets are not wrong, and mouse skill sets are not wrong.

di Stefano: Right. They do different things. And each of them has assets and liabilities. I think that is the way you should go.

One of the things you might want to think about is how the mouse perspective works in a situation where the mouse is a token, as opposed to how the mice perspective works when the mice constitute a critical mass. This relates to research that has been done on how women behave in political legislatures when they are a small fraction as opposed to when they constitute about a third or more of the body. There is research out there that suggests that when subordinates are in token positions they either tend to completely adopt the posture and behavior of the elephants or they fade away pretty quickly. But when you get enough mice together in an organization or leadership capacity, they can begin to change the dynamics of leadership.

If there are enough of them they can change the rules of the game.

Liswood: Forcing then the dominant group to what? To take on those traits?

di Stefano: To force the dominant group to at least accede to a different way of doing business. I think that is one of the most interesting pieces of research out there. Sort of tipping the balance. So it is not individual vs. individual, but that you're thinking about the balance of power between groups and organizations.

Liswood: So, it may or may not be that the dominant group begins to adopt the styles and skill sets of the non-dominant group, but they at lead don't override them?

di Stefano: At least, and in some cases some members of that dominant group might be prompted to adopt behaviors of the subordinate group. All they need is a nudge. I think this critical mass issue is really important.

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Liswood: The dominant group may in fact be able to absorb some of the traits of the non-dominant group; you then move to the original thesis which is that these traits are not inherent to the group. You have the ability to flex and develop more.

di Stefano: Absolutely. When I say they aren't inherent to the group, I don't think any group is inherently xyz. Another way of thinking of it is if you can get a critical mass of

previously subordinate groups, whose behavior begins to change the rules of the game, you expand the repertory of potential behaviors that are available to everyone.

Liswood: That is an interesting thesis and one that continues not to just argue for diversity. But one of the reasons that "diversity" hasn't really worked is we haven't gotten to that point.

di Stefano: We haven't gotten to the critical mass thing. When so many people look at diversity they look at individuals. And in most cases they are looking at tokens. And tokens have a very difficult decision to make. You either go with the flow, or you become marginalized.

Liswood: Have you read James Sorowicki's book *Wisdom of Crowds*? He talks very interestingly about homogeneous groups and heterogeneous groups, and says that what we are really after is cognitive diversity.

di Stefano: I think that is absolutely right. Cognitive proclivities I think derive in large, but not exclusive, measures from social structural location.

Liswood: What does that mean?

di Stefano: It means we don't come into the world as individuals born with a pre-given set of cognitive proclivities; they are fundamentally shaped by patterns of experience in the world. And if the pattern of experience has largely to do with the fact you are a subordinate, that is going to lead to certain cognitive proclivities which are going to be different than if you were born with a silver spoon in your mouth.

Liswood: So then the next question is, you are a member of the non-dominant group, you have identified that there are some things that you bring to the table through the social structural location that you start with, what are the ways that non-dominants can flex their power to the dominant and the reverse?

di Stefano: I think you have already stated what is the major recommendation of the book will be, which is to mix it up. Whatever endeavor, organization, project you are involved in make sure you have the potential wisdom that will come out of diversity.

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Now I am speaking individually here. Non-dominant group members should have a sense of entitlement to lead. Because they have grown up in a non-dominant structure they are asked to severely change their world view. Some of what the elephant does is actually quite good.

Sometimes the strategies used by the elephant are absolutely necessary. Sometimes you need leaders who will step in with a clear vision, who have the ability to inspire people to

do it their way. Martin Luther King is a great example of that. Sometimes you need charismatic leadership. Sometimes you need collaborative leadership, where you are

touching base with the home crowd, where you are building networks with other people. And that is a very different model of leadership. And so I think the ideal thing is for anyone to cultivate both sets of capacities.

I think that the biggest challenge for mice is to recognize that leadership is not a natural pre-given attribute, but that it derives from a very definable set of skills that can be learned. In a society where inequity prevails, those skill sets are going to be taught or socialized into some sectors of the population and not others.

Now there is a point. Skill sets are either taught or they are modeled within the group. If you are a subordinate and say, 'I don't have those skill sets and I need to go find them,' then you go get the skills training.

Liswood: David Gergen, when I interviewed him, spoke specifically of women. He said that they need to know what white men know.

di Stefano: I do think there is a mystique of leadership, that somehow it's something that people are either naturally born with or not. Every once in a while that is true. Every once in a while you get an extraordinary person that has all this charisma. But most of the time it is a learned set of skills, very basic skills.

Liswood: I am thinking of the Kathleen Hall Jamison notion of double bind, though. That is, the traits that you articulate—clear vision, inspiring others, doing it your way—that males generally can show in a much broader band than women or other racial, ethnic minorities can to state assertively the direction you want to take. We both know there is a much narrower band for black men than for white men.

di Stefano: Even stating things assertively. One of the things we work on in New Leadership is getting our students to get rid of the voice uptake. For example, do not end every sentence with a question mark.

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Liswood: I say the same thing to people—stand up if you have to, don't let yourself be interrupted.

di Stefano: I think the other thing is having thick skin. And that thick skin has to do with emotional and psychological factors, but it also has to do with material factors. And one of the important things about leadership is that it is always risky. You are always risking something. And if you are fear averse, for good reasons, having to do with material life conditions that are precarious, that is going to hurt you as a leader as well.

Liswood: That is interesting. Positional, or economic, or social acceptance affects your willingness to step into leadership.

di Stefano: That is a big one for women. God forbid that anyone wouldn't like you.

Liswood: For women, often you must trade off being nice vs. being respected. We have generally accepted notions that women may bring a more collaborative style, but we know that is a non-dominate group trait. But the fact is that it is a necessary, but not sufficient, trait to have.

di Stefano: I think what is absolutely crucial for leaders is to be able to identify contexts where certain behaviors are more or less appropriate. And you have to be very smart and very wise to figure that out. Here is a situation where I need to be collaborative and get a lot of input from people. Here is a situation where I need to stand apart from the pack and tell everyone what I think, and take a risk that they may disagree with me, or that they may be inspired by what I have to say.

Liswood: Again, in the case of gender you will find, obviously, women very comfortable with the first, but very uncomfortable with the second.

di Stefano: And the collaborative stuff is great to a point, but it can get you into a whole lot of mucky-muck stuff where nothing ever happens. It can be indefinite debate and dialogue.

It's very complex and there is no formula for it. Ultimately, really great leaders figure out how to read the situations and use some combination of those strategies in appropriate ways. You can't teach that decision.

Liswood: The military actually does a decent job of practicing, modeling, reviewing, and performing error-trials. And again, for women there isn't enough of that. I think boys grow up constantly practicing those skill sets. Obviously, wanting to make the point of men developing these other ones. They could practice these more collaborative skill sets.

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di Stefano: And there are probably a few men out there that are very good at that. But it doesn't tend to be a gender specific trait for them.

If status of non-dominancy comes to be elevated, that is a big problem. Then you are only entitled as long as you are a victim. So you are invested in maintaining that victim status.

Liswood: Right, which never gets you out of that vicious cycle of lack of self-confidence either. That whole notion of women saying things like, 'I was just lucky' whereas men say, 'Well yeah, I was really good.'

di Stefano: And it's probably a mix of both. Sometimes you are in the right place at the right time, or lucky enough to have a great mentor along the line. Some combination of that and hard work pays off.

Liswood: But the extreme version of the "luck" doesn't give you a virtuous cycle of positive reinforcement where the extreme version of, 'Yeah, I'm good' is a nice way to continue developing your self-confidence and sense of entitlement.

Have you read Anna Fels book *Necessary Dream*? It's all about ambition, women's ambition. She talks about ambition and the need to develop the skill sets which are part of ambition, but it's the act of acknowledging your capabilities. She says the women now have access to skill set development—professional school, law school, etc., but they still aren't getting the necessary recognition of their skill sets. She also says she doesn't believe that men are actually so upset that women want equal pay. They are actually upset because they are losing their centrality. Take the idea of the warrior culture. If warrior is defined as male and you put women in the military, then what the hell was a warrior? Ronni Heifitz, a Kennedy School professor, contends that women need to reflect on what men see as loss. Women empowerment may appear to be a loss to them; you aren't giving them any reason to think there is going to be gain for them.

di Stefano: One of the things you could try giving men is an extended life span. There must be some reason women are outliving men.

Liswood: Thank you. I have gotten so much from you.

di Stefano: I am honored to help. You started me on this journey when you did the project on women world leaders and it was after that I got involved with the New Leadership Program.

Liswood: I remember coming back from an interview for Women World Leaders and saying this is what they said but what does it mean? You were always there to help me

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interpret what I heard from the women presidents and prime ministers. I never imagined it would lead me here.

di Stefano: Which is what we hear from women leaders all the time. They say, ‘If you had told me 20 years ago that this is what I would be doing, I would have told you to get out of here.’ And it is never a straight line.

Liswood: And the world leaders say the same thing.

di Stefano: And the students love that because it tells them that they don’t have to have it all figured out right now, and they can focus on the next steps instead of one big plan.

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Liswood: You usually get it from the men. I’m going to do this, then this, then this.

di Stefano: Like John Roberts saying he was going to be on the Supreme Court. But that’s not the way it works for a lot of women.

Liswood: As David Gergen said, white men also feel that they, as individuals, have the ability to make an impact, that they can make a difference, that their voice is something that will make a difference.

di Stefano: And that is partially true. I think individuals can make a difference, but it takes a village. Women understand that.

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