

Interview with Gwen Ifill
Senior Correspondent
The PBS Newshour

Laura Liswood: I will describe this book to you, and you describe whatever comes to your mind around this concept. Basically, the concept is organized around dominant groups and non-dominant groups—the notion of the elephant and mouse parable. If you are an elephant in the room—i.e. a dominant person or entity—you don't wind up having to know a lot about the mouse. But if you are the mouse, you have to know a lot about the elephant. Is the elephant angry today; is the elephant moving left or right? So, this notion of female intuition is to a certain extent the notion of dominant and non-dominant groups. Similarly, I read a study that says that African-American men know more about white men than white men know about African American men.

I said that to a group in Ireland who said, 'Oh yes, the Irish know more about the English than the English know about the Irish.' Dominant, non-dominant. There are some lessons concerning large county/small county, large company/small company, men/women, ethnicity and race and so on. But, talking in terms of women and leadership skill sets, part of my analysis is that, in fact, the elephant has some really good skills. Not just brute strength, but a sense of entitlement, a sense of presence, a loud voice which it thinks should be heard; it will go where it wants to go. It doesn't concern itself with what others think. All, I think, are really good skill sets—skill sets that non-dominant groups don't always pick up as much. Non-dominant groups will develop emotional intelligence, sensitivity awareness, and multitasking skill sets, which I also think are good skill sets but, usually because they come from the non-dominant group, they aren't prized as much.

So that is my proposal and the notion underlining all of this. I talked to David Gergen about this and he said, 'Yeah, white guys know a lot of things that non-white guys don't know.' I talked to the right guy, the uberwhite guy. And Laura Tyson said to me, 'Yeah, I have noticed there are the listeners and those that are listened to, the ones that watch and those that are watched.' And that we don't give as much credence to the watcher skill sets as we do to the skills of the one being watched.

Gwen Ifill: When I got to college, I remember thinking to myself that I was living. I went to a predominantly white college in Boston, Simmons College. And it was 1970 when all the black girls had afros. Only a few of us were there and we all had similar experiences. One was that all the white girls were horrified with what we did with our hair. They didn't understand why we didn't jump in the pool, or why we didn't shower without shower caps; or that at night, most importantly, we would braid our hair and put hair oil in it to lubricate it to turn our afros into the big, beautiful things they were the next day. In short, they had no clue that black hair care was anything different than white hair care, and the reason they didn't know that is because they didn't have to know it. What we resented about that is because we grew up watching Prell commercials, we knew everything about it. We knew everything about how they took care of their hair; we knew what they prized; we knew what they didn't prize and they knew nothing about us. To this day, most people think that my hair straightened is its natural state. I don't care if they know about my hair—they don't know who I am.

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There are a couple of ways you can react to that. You can spend a lot of time being resentful, ‘Dammit they don't know who I am,’ and then not bother to tell them. This is a common feeling among black folk I know: anger that they don't know but we are going to keep it to ourselves anyway. Or you can sit there and study them, and in order to succeed in their world—if you must—select out from that what you need to know and use the things they don't know to keep them off-guard, off-balance. I find sometimes people vastly over interpret the very cock of an eyebrow from me. Because they don't know me or understand me enough to read me, they always overread what I might mean. For me, it might just be an innocent observation, for them it is, ‘What did that mean?’

Forgive me if I ramble here. We have a day laborer site down by our other building that we pass everyday. I was talking with a white, male colleague of mine about it and said that the worst thing that ever happened to me while passing by was that this guy yelled one day ‘Nigrita’. And I remember thinking ‘WHAT?!’ I wanted to pull over the car and yell at him, and this colleague said maybe it was a cultural thing for him and he considered it a compliment, but a cultural thing for me it was not. So in this case of two non-dominant cultures, who gets to define what is the acceptable approach, or the acceptable way to take someone else's approach?

But the truth is with dominant societies they never have to think that way, they never have to consider it, they always operate on the assumption that the way they do it is the norm, and everything and everybody else has to adjust to the norm. And you know what, they are right. That is the constant drag on being a minority/majority society.

I had a conversation with a member of Congress a few days ago who looked me in the eye, and with a completely straight face, making his argument against the voting rights act, told me there is no more racism in America where he travels, and so he doesn't know why it is needed. Then he told me off camera, with great pride, about how he derailed the renewal of the voting rights act of the Republican Caucus meeting. And he told me proudly how a colleague walked up to him afterwards and told him, ‘That was a lynching in there.’ Now, this member of Congress said this to me smiling because he doesn't believe racism exists; it didn't occur to him on any level that he was insulting me. He can only see what he said as an insult if he were to give up his assumption that racism doesn't exist. And he could only think that racism doesn't exist if he believes that the way he lives his life is the norm. And that is the danger of the dominant/non-dominant. It's not a question about bending over backwards to be politically correct about other people's life experiences. Even though I think that's a matter of not being politically correct. In his case, it is so clear that it's not worth taking into account the non-dominant view. And that has negative effects over time.

Liswood: Lets say more about that, what is the danger of that?

Ifill: The danger is that you stifle creativity; you stifle alternate ways of looking at things. In what I do, I spend a lot of time thinking about how to foster debate and that there is

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always value and there is always something that I don't know. If you assume that the way you see the world is the only way to see the world, or the correct way to see the world, then everything else becomes incorrect, and as a result you come up with a very narrow world view. And it doesn't allow you to see. It doesn't for instance, allow people to see the amount of poverty that Katrina unearthed. People were shocked, just shocked. They didn't know that existed. Why? Because over time we convinced ourselves that everything is fixed, and it's more comfortable to think that way until it is forced into our faces by natural disaster. So, that is the danger in deciding that your way is the clearest, most obvious way. It means that you don't value anything that is less obvious, and that is, I think, a bad thing for our society which embraces this fantasy that we are a melting pot and we're just not.

And neither should we be. What is so great about a melting pot? There is nothing distinctive about it. What do we like best about stews—being able to taste the chicken, the rice, the vegetables, not mush. We don't think mush is good in anything else except in the idea about the melting pot.

Liswood: Baby food.

Ifill: Yeah, baby food which is supposed to go down easy and not disturb the stomach and tastes terrible. Whereas, being able to coexist without being mush is something we should be aspiring to, and most American will tell you that they do aspire to, but at the same time they embrace this notion of the melting pot as if we are all the same, and we are not.

Liswood: Isn't there also a vested interest in thinking that the world is a meritocracy? If you don't who reaches the top and says 'Well, I was suddenly advantaged in this system, that is how I made it to the top.' They don't say that.

Ifill: No, but it was interesting. Richard Parson and Colin Powell are people who are very successful and yet not part of the majority. They will tell you that they were advantaged because of programs which created an advantage—Affirmative Action. But you never hear a white man say...

Liswood: Right, a dominant group member would not say, 'I was suddenly advantaged by the fact I was tall, I was white, I went to the good school.'

Ifill: Right, except to hear Warren Buffett admit that he is not leaving all of his money to his kids, because he doesn't believe that they should have that advantage. That was rare. People were shocked. They had never heard this concept from an advantaged person, that maybe this advantage was not fair, or at least shouldn't be assumed. Fair is a bad word.

Liswood: Howard Gardner wrote a book, *Leading Minds*, and he said one of the most important traits of a leader is to travel outside his or her world. This is hard for all, and particularly hard for the dominant.

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Ifill: I love it when my white friends come to parties at my house and even the most honest among them never fail to acknowledge how, in different ways—they never say it flat out—but they recognize for the first time in their lives that they are not in the majority. I point out that I am like that all the time; I am the only or one of the few black people in a room. Their discomfort is actually eye-opening to them. They notice it.

Liswood: That is how you get people to travel—to put them in those situations where they are clearly the non-dominant group.

Ifill: That is one of the things I like about my job—being in an environment where I would not otherwise go, meeting people I would not otherwise meet, being paid to open my mind to points-of-view that are not automatically mine. People ask me all the time ‘How do you keep a straight face?’ or ‘Don’t you mind when people say things you disagree with?’ Now the lynching comment I must admit brought me up short, but I kept a straight face. But the point they are making is a good one: What do you do when you are suddenly confronted with something which is profoundly different from your own point of view? I think you absorb it, but everyone doesn’t see it that way.

Liswood: Well, it’s also the rare person who can actually stand by in an objectively manner and say, ‘Oh that is interesting’ rather than emotionally poke it. Or worse, there is something wrong with this because it’s not what I expect.

So let's turn the table for a minute—my theory that dominant group members actually have some things, some traits, which non-dominant members could learn from...

Ifill: Your elephant analogy has a presence, and a voice; I think all that comes with size. I really think it’s hard to have those qualities unless you have the size that dictates it. The reason the elephant has a sense of entitlement is because no one dares get in its way. I met young people with almost no experience but who expect to have the best job in the newsroom. Not because there is anything that entitles them to it, but because it has been built into their way of thinking of themselves, and their way of imagining their way in the world. And they are almost always young white men.

Liswood: I see it a lot when I deal with the women inside corporations; men do grow up with this notion of what sociologists would call positive illusion. They think they can do anything; they think they are better than they are; and they are ready for something when they have 25% of the knowledge. The reverse is that women will have a tendency to have negative illusions. They don’t think they are as good as they are; they don’t think they are as entitled; they feel they are prepared if they have 75% of the knowledge. So you get a lot of men who go, ‘Well, yeah I’m going to run for Senate. And when you meet the young woman who does behave that way, it’s viewed negatively.

Ifill: No, it’s cognitive dissidence. But I would say to you that any non-dominant member would get that over scrutiny of that notion—‘Who does he think he is?’ But a dominant

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group member goes, 'Isn't he good, isn't he smart, isn't he clever and ambitious?' These are good words.

Liswood: But it's built into the societal DNA; I've always tried to persuade women to take on some of those attributes. I interviewed Margaret Thatcher who said, 'Life is not fair.' And Margaret Thatcher is someone who is considered to be the perfect example of all of those attributes. She was an O in a room full of X's. And as an O she tried to turn herself into an X to some success until she failed. She adapted. She took on the attributes of the species she was trying to invade and did it successfully. I find that in women, and all non-dominant groups—and white women are different than non-white women. In both cases we carry around this intuition about learning about the other. I read an article in *Newsweek* about women poker players saying 'we can read the men so easily, we've been doing it since high school.' The guy is lucky to know his date's first name on a first date.

Ifill: That would argue then that having some of the non-dominant criteria—and how women have adjusted to having that and still manage to assert power in a different way...

Instead of trying to be Margaret Thatcher, instead of trying to try to use the attributes that have been successful for men or dominant people, why not use the attributes that you have as a woman and use them for your advantage without it becoming batting your eyelashes and wearing short skirts. You understand that the world puts you in a box. You simultaneously push against that box and use the things that they have cataloged against you to achieve what you want. That is why women nod and smile and wear pretty suits. They know they still have to show confidence and they still have to show ambition within certain limitations. But that as long as the world is where it is, you have to find a way to use the ways in which women are categorized to your advantage. And I think that the truly successful women have figured that out and how to do it. Because frankly it's not worth the time to have to get past the suspicions of why doesn't she wear jewelry or makeup. Whatever is a distraction, remove it.

I tell that to young people all the time. I told this story the other night. There was a woman who came to an interview with two different earrings on. That is a perfect example. All she did was create an additional distraction. And just remove that from the table. There are enough distractions anyway. If you can get past that then you can move to the next thing, and when they stop being distracted then they may listen to what your saying or what you can accomplish.

Liswood: How do we get women to assert their leadership entitlement? Ann O'Reilly of the Kennedy School researched about this where they evaluated men and women [on leadership], and the evaluation is about the same. There are not a lot of real noticeable differences in terms of how they are evaluated. She says that what keeps the women back is that men have a sense of entitlement to lead and women do not have a sense of entitlement to lead.

Ifill: See, going to women's college—in ways that I didn't realize until I was out of school for years and years—really made a difference in that. And I still discover when I

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run into people now who went to women's colleges or went to my college. Part of it is because we didn't realize we were being taught it. Because when I went to Simmons it was striving to be the 8th sister; it wanted to be Ivy League whatever that idea of women's education was instead of sticking to its advantages which it does now, training women for careers.

And in fact, it ended up appealing to women who all training for careers, because career schools in the 70s were still seen as being very business school oriented and this wasn't that. But as a result, being in a women's school and in an environment where all of the people running all the student organizations were women, where you are called on first in class, and very importantly we didn't have to comb our hair to go to class. We didn't have to wonder how cute we looked, so the distraction was removed. We ended up grooming generations of women who I think you can always tell women's college. Did you go to women's college?

Liswood: No, I did not.

Ifill: Ah, I would have guessed wrong. I think it does a lot to remove the notion of having to have a sense of entitlement. I think you can seize leadership roles without having to feel entitled about it. I think entitlement is a bad thing, maybe it's the word. Behaving as if you deserve, no...Entitlement sounds like privileged.

Liswood: I am thinking of it more in terms of 'I can do this, I can take on the manager position, etc.'

Ifill: It's amazing to me how much men will just take on these roles, that they will feel that they have a voice, that their voice counts. You have seen that forever. But what's wrong with a woman feeling like she can do that, too. We are confined by all sorts of, all kinds of, imagined limitations. Among them, that if we speak up that we will sound shrill, that if we speak up we will damage the male person's ego. Or if we disagree with another woman it becomes boiled down to a catfight.

Liswood: All of that is mouse like behavior. I'm worried about the other. The elephant does not worry about the other.

Ifill: Oh absolutely, we will always be worried. Women will always be worried. Even if we take control, even if we take all the right steps you are supposed to take on paper, our instincts are still to say 'oh, I didn't step on your toe' and the woman who doesn't do that, I worry about, I don't feel comfortable. I feel the same way about men though, the difference is I guess I am trying to get men to assume more of the female qualities, I admire that more than the women who are trying to assume the male qualities.

Liswood: My basic thesis on this will be this kind of toolbox theories. To achieve the most you have to have the most tools in your toolbox. The elephant tools and the mouse tools, so on the day you need the elephant tools you know where to find them.

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Ifill: And men have problems using the mouse tools. Their hands are too big, they are clumsy, and they don't know how to pick them up. Whereas, the women are pretty nimble.

Liswood: And of course I am going to make reference to the notion of large country/small country.

Ifill: Well, isn't that what all the resentment in Europe towards the US is all about?

Liswood: I think its part of the failure of our policy in Iraq. We are large and we don't have to know.

Ifill: We are large, and we don't understand because we are large that we have to walk carefully. We can't just crush everyone underfoot, even if you didn't intend to—especially because you weren't thinking about them. What Europe resents about the US is not that we treat them with disdain, but that we don't see them sitting there at all. The greatest insult in life is not to be hated, but to be ignored. And that is exactly what we have happening. The resentment is so deeply rooted that you think to yourself...Today, the Japanese prime Minister was responding in a rare moment of passion—in Japanese too—to what he felt he was misquoted as saying, 'As long as you have the US on your side, you don't need anyone else.' 'I Did Not Say That!' He said it in such a firm way that the President turned and looked at him. And I think that he felt the need to push strongly on that because that is the lap dog notion that gets him, Tony Blair, any ally in trouble.

Liswood: And it gets us in trouble.

Ifill: And it gets women in trouble in our dealings with dominant people, because you cannot seem as if you will do anything to get accepted by the dominant people. You are appreciated if you're achieving and you're doing this. But it looks like you are sleeping with the boss even if you are not. There will always be the look of askance at success. How does that happen, what is that relationship about?

Liswood: Sleeping with, affirmative action...

Ifill: You name it; anything that seems to gives you a slight let up.

Liswood: Well, if your basic premise is that the group that I belong to is a superior group then how would you explain the non-superior groups getting ahead? They can't be getting ahead because they are actually good; they have to be getting ahead because of some other reason.

Ifill: Exactly. And you can always find some reason that has nothing to do with you.

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Liswood: One of my frameworks around this is that, in this era of globalization, that this elephant way of being in the world will get us in more and more trouble.

Ifill: It could. But after 2 centuries of being the elephant how is it supposed to pull back? Especially when it fundamentally believes—and so many people here fundamentally believe—that we are right. We have the keys to the kingdom when it comes to democracy and fairness. There are so many ways to shoot holes in that argument. But that is an article of faith among so many people who run this country—Democrats and Republicans—that it's not just this administration. It's part of the American psyche that we are superior and everyone else will become like us. That is why people hate us.

Liswood: There are some things about that dominant way of being that does push progress.

Ifill: I don't disagree with you. I think that to the extent that the president is correct about this worldwide notion of bringing democracy to the world. It's kind of a naive view, but it's a world view that you can understand what it is rooted in. There are many good things about the way we do things. You couldn't exist in this country as a leader of it if you didn't believe that our approach is fundamentally correct. The naiveté is that it is instantly translatable to other cultures. It doesn't make him wrong that we are doing things right in freedom and fairness and all. It becomes a problem if it becomes imposed on cultures that don't process the same way.

Liswood: If you don't take on some of the mouse attributes.

Ifill: Right. I think it is easier to get white men to take on mouse attributes than it is to get a nation to do it...

Liswood: And that is part of the thesis. The colonizer colonized.

Ifill: I can see that happening, but I won't be alive to see it.

Liswood: No, a slow erosion. I'm just intrigued by this prisoner/guard, who is watching whom. The difference is with technology being what it is today, everyone is watching everyone.

Ifill: Everyone is capable, it's cheaper, it's more acceptable, it's easier. The ability to watch is no longer just in the hands of the dominant person. Who knows what will happen in 10 years. 10 years ago cell phones had a big bag on our shoulder. And if that little basic technology has changed so much, who knows how else other technology—that we don't have the classified security clearance to know anything about—could change.

Liswood: Which means that the definition of dominant/non-dominant may shift quickly.

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Ifill: And it may be better. Because then you will have more of an exchange of ideas and power bases and ability to make change. If we understand more about Islam, I mean truly understand it, how much better would that be for guarding against future terrorist attacks. Technology and the barriers of difference overtime...

Intermarriage has made it impossible for communities to be as separate as they once were. There is still a long way to go on that. Borders fallen have made it impossible for people to remain as unto themselves. When I lived in Boston in the 70s, part of angst and the riots and the unhappiness of the busing, was that barriers were falling. And there was nothing you could do to stop it. And that is what the fighting was about. And the fighting brought the non-dominants fighting each other. In Boston the poor Irish were losing control and the poor blacks were not getting the control of their local schools and the elite sat back and watched. After a while, I hope, some sort of either co-existence comes out of it or some lower walls. Or we all kill each other.

Liswood: I have talked to men and they go in the whole notion that 20 years from now 80 percent of the population will be minorities.

Ifill: They understand this intellectually.

Liswood: Some of them say, in their more honest moments. Well, they will still be flipping the hamburgers and I will still be running the corporations.

Ifill: Geesh. They have to think that they, because survival being the kind of instinct it is, they can't possibly in their mind—for all of their embracing of the statistics—they can't think of a world that they don't exist in, that they don't dominate. Because to them, what is the point of being here if they don't dominate.

Liswood: Hannah Fels writes in her book, *Necessary Dreams*, that men aren't so upset that we want equal pay, that we want to go to the professional schools—military academies are the last sandboxes they want us in—but that it's their loss of centrality that makes them most upset.

Ifill: Who can blame them? Who wants to lose power? That is what this is all about. It's our job to take it, not their job to give it up. Which goes back to your question—the mouse taking on elephants. It's the mouse's job to take it, because the elephant will never give it up, and will never value what is good about the mouse qualities. And when they do value it they would snatch it up when they are ready to go.

Liswood: My position would be when the mouse takes the power, they really will have to develop some of the elephant skills.

Ifill: I understand that. I wish you could define what they need to take and what they need to leave because I don't want them to take it all. Then we just have female elephants and...

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Liswood: No female elephants are cognitively dissident.

Ifill: And they are interested in helping other mice. ‘Okay, I made it.’ I think you always have to figure...sure take this and translate into race. There is no question that blacks figured out a long time ago that they had better have some adaptive characteristics to succeed. But to what end? And how many do you take on? And how far do you bend over backwards not to threaten the dominant person?

White men go home and have white women at home—they are familiar with that. They don’t go home and have black people at home. Most of them anyway. And they can never get past that, they can accept it and deal well with it, but race will always be something that you can pretend you are not. No matter how much you try. There are profiles all the time of men in the Bush administration and whatever. In order for them to succeed in those settings they almost always have to leave everything else behind. They have to choose. They are running a great series in the *Washington Post* on being a black male. And there is one about a man who works for the administration and his mentor, a white man, who says ‘you can’t even tell he’s black.’ And that was a high compliment. They would never say that about a woman either, but the fact is that is the elephant’s idea of high praise is ‘you are just like me.’ And the truth is we are never going to be just like them. We don’t want to be just like them.

Liswood: Ironically, you wind up losing just what you started with—the whole notion of creativity and difference. You end up being homogenous in that sense.

Ifill: Yes, if I walk into a room at *Newshour*, people always volunteer ‘I heard on NPR this morning...’ or ‘I was watching this documentary...’ and I said one morning, ‘Well I was home watching the BET awards.’ Nobody knew what to do with that. It was clear they weren’t, and that was part of the reason I said it out loud. It was to say hey—there is value in different ways of seeing the world. There is a lot of stuff I know you don’t and I’ll bet it’s really valuable to know it. But it’s only because I have reached a point, if I was younger in my career and said that at a meeting, I would have been banned. Young people who are just still trying to make an impression can’t do that. It’s only when you have proved yourself in a million other ways that you can get away with saying you were really watching the BET awards instead of a news documentary. The secret is not to sacrifice yourself to get to that point.

Liswood: I remember starting a job and asking what the dress code was—the manager said ‘country club casual.’ I’m the daughter of a policeman, I don’t have a clue what that is. Maybe the African-American, the Hispanic, the Chinese haven’t figured it out.

Ifill: The problem then is you get the diversity of skin color or gender, but not diversity of thought, background, economy.

Liswood: You don’t get the socio-economic diversity.

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Ifill: That is one of the reasons I started the conversation with the word diversity.

Actually, I find that people are more willing to listen to what I have to say when I point out to them that when I say diversity it's not the obvious. If you say, 'I am here to speak on behalf of diversity' and they see a black woman standing there, they think you are there to speak on my right to be in your room. When diversity of world view is so much more essential than diversity of background. Because you can set your background aside. But you need to bring more to it. You need to be at least curious about what someone else might say. It's a responsibility we often leave at the wayside by having three white guys talking.

Last night we had story about voting rights. We had these two perfectly reasonable legal experts talk about the Supreme Court decision on redistricting. I looked at the pre-interviews and I went to the producer and said, 'This is nice, but are we aren't going to have two white guys talking about redistricting are we?,' and they said, 'No, we looked these guys up.' And sure enough, through the wonders of the web we found that one was indeed a black man. And I said, 'Okay fine.' Because aside from his amazing stellar background I didn't think that since television is such a visual experience that you could look at two white guys talk about the fate of Hispanic voters in Texas. And this is one is sue where you don't have to. There are lots of really accomplished people. But you have to be thinking about that all the time, and that is what diversity means to me. Which is not just diversity of point of view.

Liswood: You noticed it, they may or may not.

Ifill: They had noticed, as it turns out, but they don't always. And it's always worth asking because there is nothing more shocking that thinking you have it and having the guests arrive and discovering, 'Oh, I thought you were...'

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