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Rachel: This is "I" Statements, a podcast where complexity vulnerability and curiosity collide. Today our conversation will be centered around how intergroup dialogue has affected our experiences at Cornell. My name is Rachel Sumner and I work in Cornell University's Intergroup Dialogue Project, or IDP. I first participated in intergroup dialogue when I was a postdoc here at Cornell and one thing that I took away from that experience was definitely a greater appreciation for what's possible when people prioritize understanding each other as opposed to, for example, winning.

Baba: How's it going everyone, my name is Baba Adejuyigbe. I'm the Co-curricular Program Assistant so I also work for IDP and my first experience with Intergroup Dialogue Project was as a sophomore. I took the class and really what I took away from it was just a better understanding of myself and how I think, but also a better understanding of the world around me 'cause I was exposed to so many different perspectives um and learning how to value those perspectives as well.

Jeannie: Hello listeners, my name is Jeannie Yamazaki. I am a junior here at Cornell, my first experience with Intergroup Dialogue Project or IDP was when I took it in my sophomore fall. And the sort of first experience that stuck out with me and that's kept me going is a desire to be a better communicator and to connect better with the people I interact with.

Rachel: Um so you both mentioned this class and I'm curious to hear, it sounds like that was part of your first exposure to this practice of intergroup dialogue was a course at Cornell. Can you tell me a little bit more about that course in your experience of it?

Baba: Absolutely. So I remember kind of walking in to the classroom and seeing no professors, and just saw like other students, and I was like, "What, what's happening?" kind of thing. And I didn't know what to expect, kind of walked into everyone was sitting in a circle, was not too sure like what to expect at all. And so the structure really threw me off initially and it was, like, unlike any other experience I had at Cornell. I had come from South Africa as well and so this was like only my second year in the US and it was different to any class I had ever experienced even throughout my whole schooling. So, I was very interested in like, what to expect I think.

Jeannie: Yeah, like Baba I show up and I'm kind of like, "What are we doing? We're sitting in a circle, like, I'm talking, I'm a teacher here, what is this?" I think a lot of things helped me get to Cornell but one of them was this ability to follow what the teacher expected from me and always knowing what was needed from me and being able to provide that like along the lines of the rubric right. And so I still wasn't used to this idea of that, like, my own thoughts and experiences were something that I would imbue into the classroom space and so I know in those early days participating in that way was something that was a struggle for me. Um, that's my memory of that sort of first engagement.

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Rachel: Jeannie, you are a facilitator right now and I'm wondering if you can tell us a little bit about that role.

Jeannie: I think right they often talk about teaching something as the best way to learn it. I just, each time I get ready to bring material to the class, to discuss something in class, I know that I'm getting just a little bit better. And I get to think about, I guess, like the different ways in which people are receiving the

material. Just understanding that, like, my understanding in the first sort of way that I took it in isn't the only way to understand things. I guess this kind of gets to very meta level, right, but as we talk about how there are different perceptions and experiences that color the way we experience the world, they also color the way we learn about what we're teaching which is the fact that, right, these perceptions and experiences change how we take in the world. And so doing that process and really being able to see myself as an educator and as someone who has skills to give has been truly like a transformative experience for me. Not to get like all sappy on the podcast

[music]

Jeannie: Growing up I was like a quiet kid, I was like a smart kid, and my whole identity was like getting good grades and whatever, and it was like very one dimensional. And the college process as a whole but also IDP especially has helped me see that I am a multifaceted human, I have many social identities just like everyone else. So seeing the importance of my social identities also seeing myself as, like, a capable person, like having more skills and being able to connect with other people as like a human being, and how I think that's made me just more of a thoughtful, better person. Yeah, Baba's nodding.

Baba: I think going off that, I found that with IDP in that, like, the communication skills I was learning in session and the ways to think about the world and to think about social identity and to think about race and to think about power and privilege and things like that, I was just seeing both in the classroom and then seeing out in the real world. And for me I really crave that like level of tangibility in that, like I don't necessarily...that's why did research in engineering. I don't like kind of collecting data - sorry

[laughter]

Jeannie: Rachel, our resident data collector is offended

Rachel: No I'm not! I'm not! I understand that not everyone has my level of enthusiasm for data

Baba: But it's less so like the problem with collecting data and moreso like where does it go after that. So I really crave that like level of tangibility, seeing what I do in the classroom spaces in the real world and things like that. And so IDP was more of that and, and, what I was doing in the classroom space I would have an opportunity to practice in everyday life. And for me that really stuck out to me and it really changed the way I think. It really changed the way I made sense of the world. But I think most importantly it really allowed me to be open to new perspectives, different perspectives, and not to be so one dimensional and so focused on kind of myself in my own issues, but also to pay attention to what's going on around me.

Rachel: Now Jeannie is nodding. I mean you both have kind of started to talk about this right? Jeannie you said it, it helps you connect with people and Baba you said, you know, it makes you open to more perspectives or these are skills you can actually use in interactions with other people. You know, I think about the ways that intergroup dialogue has affected my interactions with other people and one example that comes to mind is in a conversation with a colleague she mentioned this like quote American professional thing that I do. She described this as, you know, being kind of closed off or like getting uncomfortable and not making space for conversations that aren't about work, right. Like I would show up to a meeting and just start with like, "OK great, agenda item number one..." as opposed to like, "How is everyone doing?" and treating people like people. You know, I think I was pretty transactional in some of my professional interactions and in some ways I can see how this happened

right, I grew up with a lot of messages about work hours are for work business only, right, you sort of check a part of yourself at the door when you're at work. And, you know, being a relatively – I'll flatter myself - being a young woman in academia I think I often felt like, at conferences or things like that, that I had to demonstrate a level of seriousness to be taken seriously by, like, older academics, many of whom are men or many of whom had been in the field for a long time and had credibility by virtue of their experience. And so I can also see these ways that I may be built up a little bit like, "I have to be very serious. I have to be very professional for you to, for you to think that I know what I'm talking about when I drop all this sweet data on you." And, you know, I think in some ways that conversation wouldn't have been possible without intergroup dialogue. I think the fact that this colleague articulated an identity-related thing that I was doing, I think that we had a candid conversation about identity. Part of what I love about intergroup dialogue is that it makes space for people saying things that may otherwise be hard to say, right, and for people hearing things that may otherwise be hard to hear. I don't know, that's one example of how I can really see intergroup dialogue showing up in the way that I interact with other people.

Baba: I think it's been helpful in the way I think about my own identity. So, figuring out – I'm a black man, um and coming from South Africa - and so college was very new and interesting for me. And the things that I experienced as a black man in South Africa, I experienced some of them in America. And the things that I, yeah, and there were new things that I experienced as well. And so I just like kinda felt like I was dropped into this kind of new landscape, kind of like beamed in, and had to make sense of it all. And what IDP helped me do was equip with the tools to do that and so, like in conversations about race, instead of kind of steamrolling through them I was able to then listen more effectively, talk to different people, understand their perspectives, and then ground my experiences in my own perspective and communicate across these differences. And for me that was helpful in figuring out what was going on in the world around me, figuring out my place within systems, figuring out how I perpetuate them consciously and unconsciously, and how, you know, even with the most like joyful and good intent I could still be causing some harm along the way. Um, and doing that's like a very real and introspective experience for me and it really helped me just become, um, better. I'm still working at it, still fumble a little bit, I'm still, still don't have it 100%, but I think I have some pretty gnarly tools that help.

Jeannie: The example I'm thinking of actually, it's not at that level of social identity, and not that, like you know, things are in a linear process or hierarchy, but I'm talking like my ability to like have an opinion and like claim it is something that I struggled with for a long time. Going back to that idea that dialogue helps us to not fear difference, right, and see it as a way to expand our understanding of each other, see difference is not a scary thing but like, "Oh this is so interesting, like, what led you to hold this different belief or feeling?" And I I was thinking about how when I was younger I would, with really basic things like movies or music or like pasta dishes, just wait for someone else to say their opinion like, "Yeah that sounds great!" Or, you know, if I say - I'm like, you know, I was young, I was in high school - like, "I don't, I don't like the new Taylor Swift album that much" and then someone's like, "Really? I thought it was great!" and then I'm, you know, I'm backtracking. I'm, "You know what, like, yeah you're right. I guess like she's pretty good." like yeah um and you know that...

Baba: Sorry to the Swifties out there

Jeannie: No this was a purely fictional example

[laughter]

Jeannie: No but the point of that example is that I would water myself down because I saw difference as something to be feared, even something as basic as a difference in musical taste. Right, and if I can't even have differences of opinion about musical taste then I can't, I definitely wasn't able to talk about things like oppression, like gender, and sexual orientation, and race. I'm allowed to have different opinions from someone else different experiences from someone else and they're not any less valid. And that has been really, like, a big impact from intergroup dialogue on me for sure.

Baba: Yeah those differences are huge. I'm just thinking about so many instances where I've, pre-IDP- Baba, would go into situations and experience differences and be like, "Yeah, that's it: done. Cancelled." Like, "See you later," kind of thing and never kind of speak to or deal with that person again. But I think where I really started to find value was really when I started to engage in those moments of conflict. One example I'm thinking about is while I was at Cornell I was on the football team and the Kaepernick saga was going down, and we had people on either side. Some people kind of for Kaepernick and his movement and some people who saw it differently. And I remember having conversations in the locker room and them being very, kind of, explosive. In those moments I would react in a very, like, closed off way and I would eventually pull back and kind of storm, storm off. That wasn't necessarily the best thing to do in those moments, or necessarily the most productive thing to do in those moments. And I think after going through IDP and learning those skills, those conversations became different. I'm, I was able to have very very productive conversations with my teammates about things like the Kaepernick incident, was able to communicate my side and the way I saw things and the way I viewed what he was doing, and then being able to listen to their side and being open to understanding, you know, how they were seeing things. And even if we didn't necessarily agree to everything in that moment, what we could do is connect, and I think that that that's missing. Even in the midst of conflict we could connect, and that for me was big.

Rachel: Yeah. I think it is hard, it has been hard for me sometimes in those points of conflict or disagreement to remind myself that connection is possible. I think, I think of this one example where we were doing an activity when I was participating in intergroup dialogue: the facilitators would read a bunch of statements and then people had to sort of indicate how much we agree or disagree with those statements. These statements were around things like feeling like if you were to have a family you would be expected to leave work for a while or you would expect to leave work for a while. And in a conversation after this activity one of the students, he was a man, said, "Well, you know, these statements that you read, they're just not really relevant. I wish you had included more things around like publications or conferences." And I was shocked because to me they were so relevant. I felt so emboldened to be like, "Hey now, let's use some 'I' statements. They're not relevant to you, they are very relevant to me. I have thought about all these things before." And I'm, it was a moment where I felt myself being surprised and realized that I had sort of taken it for granted that they were equally relevant to everyone. And so it was an opportunity for me not only to share what I felt, but acknowledge that like, "Oh, my experience of thinking about what it means to be a professional has been informed by my gender, has been informed by, you know, this society in which I live."

Baba: Yeah, yeah. I think the IDP experience of requiring you to bring your whole self, I think is huge. I forget who said in the beginning but, you know, I think Rachel you were talking about your, your professional experience and how within professional realms you were socialized to kind of compartmentalize things and leave things at the door. In IDP it's like, "No, bring everything. Bring it all and bring your whole self." And I think that not requiring you to separate parts of yourself and having a learning educational environment which welcomes the bringing of your whole self, for me, was like huge and really helped me just become a more socially aware person.

Jeannie: I'm just sitting here thinking about vulnerability, I guess, as you two spoke about your experiences, and how the dialogue space has required vulnerability from me in ways that I think I haven't always realized. Like you know, I have all of my therapist's like vocabulary and I have those feeling words and so I have often thought that I was good at vulnerability because of that, but then I reflect on these tough conversations that I've had. The one that comes to mind is one time someone in my house was arguing that they didn't find like mimicking a South Asian accent like offensive and I'm thinking about how in that moment I had just learned some of our communication tools in class. I went into that experience just very upset, you know, tried to use some of our tools but warped them because really ultimately I was just sort of trying to prove my housemate wrong and, you know, "This is why you're wrong." And, you know, I still think that it's not right, I still do think that there is, that is an offensive behavior, but I reflect on how in that conversation I went in with assumptions about that person and assumptions about how the conversation would go and how, for me, a lot of dialogue has been about finding that balance of holding on to my own experiences and what I believe is right and advocating for that while also being willing to have my assumptions proven wrong and how I think a lot of times, for me, you know, that vulnerability of willing to have these sort of ingrained beliefs proven wrong is a scary space and so I reacted in a not at all dialogue way of just, like, kind of being on the offense or kind of just not engaging at all. And so, yeah, I'm just thinking a lot about what vulnerability looks like and how it is a much tougher thing than I think I've realized.

Baba: I think it's very interesting that you talk about vulnerability because, I think very similar to your experience Jeannie, I had a lot of vocabulary about what it means to perform this like, um, perform vulnerability. But, um, I also wore this mask for a lot of the time that I was out there in the world, in that I would often not be vulnerable. I got good at performing it but I wouldn't let people in, right, wouldn't let people passed the façade. But IDP like stripped it and like trampled all over my little mask. Never again, never wore it again. But really, it really both modeled and then encouraged me to model raw vulnerability, whatever that looked like, right, and so if that looked like tears then tears, if that looked like anger then anger, if that looked like happiness over the fact that you understand my perspective then yeah. And those are all valid and those are OK, and, and I think that that shifting paradigm around the concept of vulnerability was hugely beneficial for me.

Rachel: Yeah, it's hard to show up and be yourself and, whether it's being your whole self like you talked about Baba or bringing what you believe but also being willing to let go of some of that if, you know, someone shares a perspective that changes the way you're thinking about it, I've also found that to be incredibly difficult. I think I also, you know, we keep talking about social identities, right, this idea that as multifaceted people we belong to different groups and I think a challenge for me is that it's really hard to have conversations about multiple social identities. You know, I'm thinking of in a class last spring having a series of conversations about discrimination in the workplace – broadly, right - and some of the people involved in these conversations over time were well-educated, American, cisgender, high-SES, straight, men of color. I share a lot of those identities, not all of those identities, and I was struck by the fact that so often these conversations ended up being about race discrimination in the workplace. And, you know, I found myself in the moment, like, pushing myself to understand like why, why is this the thing that keeps coming up? Like why, if we're all in this conversation together I want to understand why race is the thing that these students keep bringing up. And part of why I think those conversations are also hard is I'm a white person and I feel a little bit unclear about how much of my frustration or confusion or really having to push myself to keep being curious in those conversations is about the fact that I have not been on the receiving end of discrimination in the workplace because of my race. Um so, for me I can say that it's hard because we're not talking about enough identities, I don't know, I think

these conversations can be hard for so many reasons and I can tell myself a story about why it's hard sometimes and I never know how accurate that story is.

Baba: Yeah I think on the flip side of that, for me, what I found challenging about staying in dialogue was incorporating those new perspectives. You know, I am a black man and so that was my most salient identity and it was very hard for me not to talk about that because it seemed like, you know, everywhere I went that was what the world was telling me. "You're black. You're black and so you're being followed in the store 'cause you're black, and they lock the doors when you walk past 'cause you're black." So the world kept reminding me of this and so it just felt super salient to me. I think for me what changed is that being in that dialogue space and talking about different social identities, you kind of realize your experience is not the same as everyone else's, and that's important to recognize, and there are different things that make up different experiences for different people. And that, that sense of curiosity for me helped me to think about where the balance was between being super cognizant of my experiences my social identity but also being open and willing to engage and communicate across differences as well.

Jeannie: I know I got, I got a little quiet over at my end of the table. I'm just thinking again. I got sort of in my feelings before and I'm still feeling those feelings. And so I'm thinking about feelings and I'm thinking about as we do this work of asking people to, right, want to explore other people's identities and to share about those very salient personal identities while also, right, exploring those other identities of their own which is, we asked so much of everybody. You know, we hear words like you know, tiring, frustrating, sad, exhausted. And I know as a very feelingsy person my instinct is to want to, like, protect and make the bad feelings go away and make everyone feel happy and laughing and getting along. And it has been, you know, something I've worked really hard to learn that growth can't happen while everybody is happy and laughing, to let people be upset and to let people feel whatever feeling they have. That is definitely, like, my challenge with intergroup dialogue.

[music]

Baba: So I'm someone who has been at Cornell for going on 6 years now.

Jeannie: He's old!

Baba: Yeah, not really, I'm 24. But, um, after taking the class I was like, this cannot be it. In fact I took the class, then I went on to minor in inequality studies, and and and...I was just so curious. And that curiosity kind of led me to facilitating and, so, that kind of empowering experience as a facilitator really led me to do more work in in the IDP space. Especially leading up to what I want to do in life which is be a physician, um, and being able to personally connect with people is paramount to being a physician and is paramount to being a good physician and I want to be a good physician. I'm not going to know who's walking through my door. I'm not going to know what social identities they have, things like that, but what IDP does is it allows me to, to be able to communicate effectively regardless of the things that they have and to be open to listening to their perspectives and things like that. And to consider different things that I maybe am not considering for myself. And thinking about patient care in that way, for me, is appealing because it allows me to be more tailored and more conscious as a physician.

Rachel: Jeannie just put her hand on her heart. I'm wondering, Jeannie, why do you stay?

Jeannie: Why do I stay? I guess I'm thinking, uh, as long as we're revealing our ages I'm 20...

Rachel: Oh god, why are we revealing our ages? I'm 33.

Baba: Don't worry, Rachel's 21.

Rachel: I'm 33!

Baba! 21! 21! 21!

Rachel: No, I'm not ashamed of it. We're gonna have to do a dialogue about age. I'm 33 and it's fine.

[laughter]

Jeannie: All right, all right, back to me, focus back on me now. All right, all right we're listening...

[laughter]

Rachel: We're listening to Jeannie.

Jeannie: So yeah I am 20 I've been at Cornell going on 3 years now and I can think of, oh my gosh, I'm a different person from the person who came in. Absolutely. In two and a half years that's a very short amount of time to feel the changes that I feel like I've gone through, and those changes are endless. You know, I mentioned being able to actually have an opinion now: that's pretty cool, I like, I like doing that. And as I think about my future and what I want to do, I'm in the environmental and sustainability sciences field, you know, want to save this planet. I think about how all of the different kinds of people who are going to need to work together to make that grand challenge, you know, to overcome that. And I think about how intergroup dialogue, how it's given me tools and skills to even begin to think that I could maybe have a small part in making that happen. And so, um, just the ability to connect with other people, I think that's what I really love about it. I think we're a program full of big dreamers.

Rachel: Cool.

Baba: I feel good, feel good yeah. We should do this more often.

Rachel: OK great, yeah let's do it. This podcast is made by a Cornell University's Intergroup Dialogue Project. If you're curious to learn more about our program please visit www.idp.cornell.edu, thanks and bye.

Jeannie: Thanks and bye? Love it. Don't forget to like comment and subscribe.

Baba: And subscribe. Cue the jingle.

[music]