

"I" Statements podcast Episode 10: Objectivity

Rachel: This is "I" Statements, a podcast where complexity, vulnerability, and curiosity collide. In this episode we're talking about objectivity. My name is Rachel Sumner and I work for Cornell University's Intergroup Dialogue Project, or IDP, and a word that comes to mind for me when I think about objectivity is "aspirational."

Kathryn: My name is Kathryn Stamm, I am a peer facilitator for IDP, I'm also a junior at Cornell, I'm studying English and American Studies, and one word that comes to mind for me when I think about objectivity is "lost."

Khary: And I'm Khary Pryce, I'm a junior studying Industrial and Labor Relations and I'm also a peer facilitator, and the word that comes to mind when I think about objectivity is "facts."

Rachel: Different things come to mind for us when we think about objectivity, whether it's aspirational or something that's lost or something deeply connected to facts; how, in your experience, have you been taught to think about objectivity?

Khary: Well during middle school and throughout my academic career so far objectivity has been in the form of the scientific method, being very rational and analytical about the things that you're trying to think about: don't bring in feelings, don't bring in biases and don't bring in bigger structures, think really only about the facts of what happened and then evaluating those. And I brought that into my own life different ways when I was younger I felt like I was very impulsive and - just by virtue of being like the clumsy, funny, clowny kind of girl - there was some pushback from like adults when it got too far like, "Think before you speak, don't just say the first thing that comes to your mind," that was my like socialization of what objectivity looks like. And then I got really into thinking before I speak like that quote "think before you speak, think before you speak" to the point where I was doing it too much and holding my tongue to be objective and less, kind of, naturally what I guess I wanted my first impulse to -curtailing that a little bit.

Rachel: Yeah it sounds like really delving into that separation between facts and feelings, or thoughts and feelings, and prioritizing one over the other. It's interesting to me that you brought up science because that's also true for me. And your example was from middle school, I started thinking about objectivity and science later: so, when I was in graduate school I was studying developmental psychology and everything I was exposed to in the way that we talked about doing research and science and the scientific method did seem to be trying to aspire or get closer to objectivity. I feel like I didn't hear so much about how scientists are also humans who have both thoughts and feelings and who bring their own prior experiences to the questions that are interesting to them. The things I paid attention to as a scientist cannot be separated from my own experiences and so it's hard for me to even pretend that I can be objective as a scientist.

Kathryn: Yeah Rachel, a lot of what you said really resonated with me. I'm not a scientist, I'm very much, like, studying the humanities, but I write and edit in the news department for the Cornell Daily Sun, which is the independent newspaper at Cornell. And we definitely grapple with a lot of questions about objectivity and I, I have struggled with that as a journalist, that I should be objective, that I need to get rid of my humanity in some ways. Because I make decisions about what I cover and what I think is newsworthy and what I think should be included based on my own perceptions, but also sometimes my own biases and experiences. And so something we think a lot about at the Sun and one of the questions I'm trying to bring in more is: who's in the room? who are the journalists that are, you know, writing stories and reaching out to sources? And I think it's really easy to just, sort of, cover the communities that I'm already a part of, cover people I know, people who look like me and people I already understand. But I don't think that does a service to our audience, to the people who are reading the news that we're writing, because they're only getting the view of the journalists in the room and historically newsrooms are not that representative of the people that they cover, of the communities that read the paper, and that's true for the Sun as well.

Khary: I was gonna say you guys' discussion of, like, these scientists and supposedly objective people having opinions and biases behind them - that's kind of, bottom line, I just think: is objectivity really, is it a thing? does it exist? Because there's people who are making choices on what to cover and what to study, these people - you can't study everything, like, you can't fully cover everything, you can't touch on every single thing, so then how do you pick the things that are most important to all of us when all of us have different things that are important to? Like what is a good form of objectivity or not being objective? That's my question, how do you do that right?

Kathryn: I'm coming back to what Khary was saying at the beginning about feelings. Yeah, I think that if I were to move towards objectivity, like just say, 'this is my ultimate goal,' I would have to set aside my own feelings. Not just my biases and assumptions that aren't always positive or - I think that sometimes, you know, having these biases and assumptions is not a good thing, but I don't want to get rid of my feelings. I think that for me that comes through in journalism of, if I'm not empathizing with my subjects and my sources and being really intentional about presenting them as human, my emotions and feelings absolutely come through. I try to be fair and truthful but I think that if I were to strip some of that down I would be losing some of, like, what makes us human which I really think *is* that, like, you know, emotion, the feelings that we have.

Khary: What's interesting about objectivity to me right now is the conversations that are happening in the real world with like everything in the news. Oh my godness, police violence, police brutality, 'what are the facts, let's be objective here,' causal chains - and I'm pre law (in quotes - my mom would hate to hear me say that! She's an attorney, I'm supposed to go to law school - I'm sorry, mom! Not saying that it won't happen...) but I do a lot of that kind of causal chain-like thinking, analysis, piecing things together in my daily life. But then, like, you see in

the news facts and what is the truth and biased news sources, 'is this new source saying this?' 'what did they say?' We've got a whole pandemic going on, there's science in the news more than I think it has been in the past...that's what makes it interesting to me: facts versus feelings and when are facts useful, when are feelings useful? And I think the line blurs and feelings - I also group in with, like, biases and institutions and things that aren't like actual tangible things, but historical context: it all goes into the feeling side. When do we have to take this, these things and consider them? You cannot think about certain structures and not think about the historical context. Like numbers and stats and everything are important but then put them in context 'cause that's the other stuff that really matters and tells a story.

Rachel: Khary, is there a particular domain or example where you feel like, like that historical context gets left out and would really change people's understanding if they had it?

Khary: Police violence and police brutality. The crime rates are so-and-so for Black communities, that's a fact, but think about why that's like that. Think about housing and educational and wage disparities that brought us there. Those are facts too.

Rachel: Yeah, part of what I what I hear in the way you're talking about this, people are sharing facts, sure, whether it's about, you know, how many unarmed Black people are killed by police or rates of crime in different communities or, you know, resources that are available in a given zip code. And what I hear you saying, Khary, is that, yeah those things may be true, they may be objectively true, but when we only focus on those facts and not the context, the facts that led us to this moment, we're getting a very different story. Then you're actually telling a very subjective story when you're picking certain facts. And so yeah, that tension feels very real, and like, as you said, has real implications for how we understand the cause of these problems or issues or violence. I think about this having been - so, like having grown up in a low-income family, I'm white and my mom and I lived with my grandparents when I was little. And my grandparents had a house that they owned, my grandfather had served in the Navy, so I don't know if he got any benefits from having been in the military but I do know that those benefits have been made available to white military members in a way that hasn't been true for Black military members, for example, historically. And also I don't know when my ancestors got to the United States but this has been a country where white people have been allowed to own property, gain capital, pass these things down to their descendants, and so I am part of a group that has benefited in the long history of this country. Even though I did not have a lot of resources when I was young, I belong to a group that has always been allowed to accrue resources in this country. And so if I zoomed in on my own story it would seem pretty disempowered or, you know, not that privileged, but if I zoom out and look at the history of people who share my racial identity in the United States it's a very different story.

Khary: Right, those two different stories, they're both right. They're both true. They're both objective.

Rachel: Yeah.

Kathryn: Yeah there's so much and, and not only, like, whose story, like both those stories can be true, but then which story we hear I think also comes into play when we're thinking about objectivity and truth and, and power. Thinking about whose, yeah, about who has the power to tell the story and whose story gets told. In early June after George Floyd's death and the resulting Black Lives Matter protests, the Sun knew that we had to also be covering this. And our coverage is often Cornell- or Ithaca-specific so we were thinking about how Cornellians, how Ithacans were reacting. So I was covering that, but in addition to that I had to reference what was going on nationally, had to give context, and so I found myself asking all of these big questions and not really finding easy answers. I wasn't sure how to name George Floyd's death, if I gave the subject of the sentence to police and said that "the police killed George Floyd" or if I would say that "Floyd was killed by the police" and what the implications of those, like, slight changes in syntax would do. Or what verb I used, if I said that "he was killed" or if I said "he was murdered" or if I gave more details about what actually happened. And I realized how much power I had in making those decisions, and then I thought about who was making those decisions at other papers. I'm a person of color but I'm not Black and so what, you know, what that meant in how I was telling the story. And yeah, I don't know, it just, that's been sitting with me a lot lately about those smaller decisions and then what we continue to cover. If we're only covering communities of color when, when something horrible has happened, right, we're not giving as much nuance to their experience. They're like a - now the objectivity is that they're only newsworthy when something terrible has happened.

Khary: Ooh, so many thoughts. I have so many thoughts stemming from you guys'- this conversation, even from, Kathryn, you starting to tell the story of how you were covering news over this summer and the connotations of words, how those can tell a story in and of themselves. And when I was thinking about that, my experience this summer was so many different layers to it: people coming to me asking me how I felt, how they should feel, me having to represent all Black folks, me having to educate, me having to deal with my own emotions and maybe not doing that so, so adequately. But one of the things that stamped this summer for me is people suddenly having opinions about police brutality, police violence - not suddenly having opinions, maybe they had them, but being vocal about them suddenly when it turns into looting and it turns violent. Hearing about condemning that so much and not so much about the conditions that led to rioting and looting, and focusing on the rioting and looting and maybe not so much on the peaceful protesting and all this other stuff. And I had to kind of reconcile which of my - people in my circle were coming out of the woodwork to condemn this thing and talk about this thing, but I had never heard them say anything about the other bad conditions that brought us here.

Kathryn: Yeah, I think which - something that you said, Khary, sort of the - which violence we're focusing on: the small instances of violence in the protests versus like, vast and historic and, I dunno, systemic violence against Black people. It's getting away a little bit from objectivity but it is still about, like, which stories are being told as truthful, but: I'm curious what your perceptions of this summer - and Black Lives Matter protests, the murders of Black people,

often at the hands of police – like, what you felt about like the way that it was being covered? So obviously it's really charged and there are lots of feel-, like ways to feel about what happened, but I guess I'm curious about how it was presented as maybe objective or as truth, 'cause there were lots of conflicting things and lots of, I think, words that were being chosen and things that were being focused on that obviously big decisions went into, and I'm not always sure they were the right decisions.

Rachel: What immediately comes to mind for me on hearing your question is, is news that I did consume over the summer but have been continuing to consume 'cause it's about Breonna Taylor. And, so, we're recording this in September, they have just released information about who's being charged in that case, and listening to some of the news coverage about that and, and the reaction to that news about, you know, the, the two officers who, who did shoot her not being charged; some of that news coverage has talked about the reactions of people in Louisville and the reactions of her family and, and what people believe about what happened that night. Some of the coverage talked about things that people who are protesting believe that actually are not true, but they said that this was a product of the state not being very transparent about that investigation and so I'm thinking about how people are being guided by the real sense that what happened to Breonna Taylor is not right. And so, so things that people encounter in the news or on social media or from others that feel consistent with that – I've felt this, it's much easier to believe that they're probably true because, because that's what I think, that's what I think, right. This was, this should not have happened and, and the way that even the state has talked about the charges that were brought and them describing it as their not really having a choice because her boyfriend fired first; I think that's bringing up for me, like, the law is written in a certain way which sometimes gets presented as objective or fixed and how, what happens when that doesn't reconcile with what's good or true in the world.

Khary: I just had a conversation last night with my parents about Breonna Taylor and the facts that led up to the, like, gunfight where she was caught in crossfire. The story that I was hearing was different than the story that my dad had heard, and was different than the way that my mom had heard, and we're all trying to pin down the facts like we're in the courtroom. My mom is an attorney so, and I think the same way, and my dad also has all this creative, like, background; we all have our own experiences, we're coming together to figure out, kind of, was there wrongdoing? was there negligence? How can you, Rachel, like what you just said, how can I accept the grand jury's decision that there was no real wrongdoing there, but then a Black woman is dead? Like, that is so hard to reconcile. And then, Rachel, another thing that you said is crimes are – we write what is a crime and what are the laws. Like something in and of itself, an action, is not a crime until you make it criminal and laws are, are made up and we write the laws. Like there's agency, kind of, there. It's not that something is criminal in itself, it's like, we deem it to be a criminal action. And if it's truly that the police did nothing wrong - and wrong is the what we say they can do - like if they do nothing wrong, how is she dead? That is just, there's like a dissonance there for me. Why are there no - at the end of the day how do we stop that from happening ever ever ever again?

Rachel: Yeah, I think that's a necessary question, and you just talked about, Khary, how people make these rules, people make these laws, and we figure out what's important and relevant together. And so I am wondering: what is possible when we think about a different kind of future or just how to move forward?

Khary: One of the things that I was thinking about when Kathryn said, was talking about representation in newsrooms, that might be a good way to remedy and combat where to maybe too much objectivity gets us.

Kathryn: I think there's also so much power in that because journalists give voice to what people believe, and so often we're taught to show both sides and give equal merit and equal weight to both sides. And I'm not sure that that's always, always what we should be doing and if, like, can we give equal weight to the dominant narrative that perpetuates racism and then also this perspective that challenges that dominant narrative, that has another perspective? What's the impact of saying that these are equal and pretending maybe, like, everyone perceives them as equal and people can make their own decision after that? And I also think it prevents us from naming things as "racist" or "white supremacy" when they are, because calling it that in the context that we're in right now, saying something is racist isn't objective, like, that, people find that to be so charged and I think that further complicates things. Like what is the role of the journalist in naming something as racist? Do I have to quote someone who's calling it racist or can I as the writer or the editor call it racist? And I don't know what, what the, the answer is yet. As we sort of come to the end of the conversation those are the things that are still lingering with me because objectivity, you know, aspiring to objectivity isn't neutral but it holds a lot of weight and can be really dangerous I think.

Rachel: You're helping me think about how objectivity can be used as a tool to perpetuate the status quo and how, like, presenting narratives or examples that go against what we are used to or what is thought of as good and right gets described as not objective. This is also making me think about how objectivity is used to keep people out of the room, so I'm thinking, in particular, because it's an election year in the United States, about who's been president. And they've all been men and in my lifetime I've seen women run for office and get described as too emotional for the job, cartoons about 'Oh God, if she's PMSing don't let her near the switch that controls the nuclear weapons!' and implying that women can't possibly be objective because we have hormones that are different from everyone who's ever been president so far. Who said men are objective? Like I think, yeah, I think there's this way in which a story gets told that cisgender men are objective and people who are not that can't be objective and therefore can't have access to some of these positions or roles in society because objectivity is *really* important, and I think all of that is, is not true. I think it's not true that cisgender men are always objective. I think it's not true that objectivity is a thing we necessarily need in some of these roles - like where, where are feelings? where is empathy? why isn't that a thing that is really important when we're thinking about who our leaders are and who our journalists are and who our scholars are and who our attorneys are and, yeah.

Kathryn: That humanity feels so important to me...

Khary: Same here.

Kathryn: ...and to ignore it feels really dissonant. Right, like, to...I don't know. I don't know.

Khary: I think it doesn't – it's not only relegated to newsrooms too, it's every single room, it's like rooms where there are people in power, it's rooms at the entry level and positions too - representation can go a good long way, maybe not do the whole work but do a long way of at least putting different stories on the table.

Kathryn: Yeah at least challenging what is objective. Yeah, I'm mostly just glad that we're not sort of settling for easy answers but sort of sitting in the complexity and asking questions and thinking about all of the things: about how we choose leaders, how we decide what gets portrayed in the news, and who's guilty and who's not. Like all of these really big questions that have huge implications. I'm mostly just glad that there's a little bit more space for complexity and that we don't need to, you know, just like come to one single answer and be satisfied with that.

Rachel: Well this is, you know, the podcast where complexity, vulnerability, and curiosity collide so...

Kathryn: Oh yeah.

Rachel: I'm glad and also incredibly grateful to both of you for really asking tough questions and not settling for easy answers and for bringing your own perspectives to this conversation. You've given me a lot to think about and a lot to feel, if I'm being honest, so again, thank you, thank you both. And, objectively, I guess, this podcast is made by Cornell University's Intergroup Dialogue Project. If you, listeners, have ideas for future episode topics I hope you'll send us an email. You can find our contact information and learn more about our program at our website, www.idp.cornell.edu. Thanks and bye.

Khary: That was amazing. This has been the most, I don't even know, like not strange but like different hour of my life.