

## "I" Statements – Episode 11 – Control

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

Jeannie: My name is Jeannie Yamazaki, I'm a senior at Cornell, also an IDP facilitator, and when I think of control a word that comes to mind is "imbalance."

Carley: My name is Carley Robinson, I am a senior at Cornell, I am an IDP facilitator, and a word that comes to mind for me when I think of control is "tension." I think I think of tension because I think of kind of a closed fistness when I think of control, like my body just gets really tense and I always start thinking about, like,, things that I either don't have control over and feel like I should have control over and like I'm doing a bad job managing my control over these things...so yeah, my body just gets really tense when I think about the word control.

Rachel: So maybe our feelings about control - or the things that come to mind for us - are related to being imbalanced or some sort of tension. When do you feel like you have control in your life and what makes you feel that way?

Jeannie: I was thinking about growing up, you know, as a US citizen, high socioeconomic status, knew I was going to college. I, in a lot of ways, have a lot of control over my life, I have a lot of freedom in choosing what I get to study and thinking about what I want to do after school. And so I was reflecting on that and thinking about how, you know, I never really explicitly labeled it as control, as an element of control, that I hold until I was sort of thinking about it for recording this episode. And I think that speaks a lot to, you know, how we talk about privilege and this idea, you know, something that I have and shapes my life in such a huge way and yet I'm not articulating until I'm like sitting down to do the task of articulating it. So, always learning. always learning to see my privilege better. And then in terms of regaining my control, which has a lot to do with my, my less privileged identities, and so it was much easier to think of - at least in terms of what comes to mind quickly, emotionally difficult - growing up, around my later high school years I really struggled with depression, I really struggled with eating disorders. And so my identity as a woman, as a young adult is very tied with my relationship to my body and how people sort of perceive me, which is perceiving my body in a lot of ways. And so I have, uh, an interesting relationship to my body and one thing that has helped me sort of regain a feeling of control in this relationship that otherwise feels sort of disconnected and feels out of control sometimes - which is so weird 'cause it's like, am I not my own body? and yet I feel like I have no control over it sometimes - but something that made me feel like I have control was getting a tattoo. I have two now, so I have my little baby cat on my inner arm and then I have the big ol' snake on my left side. And both of these times, I got them about two years apart, but even the first one my, my little baby cat tattoo, like the

second it was done it was this feeling of - maybe for the first time in my life or, you know, first time since kind of descending into a more complicated and darker relationship with my body - this feeling of having control over what my body gets to look like and what other people see when they see my body. And that was also really huge with this, like, very large snake tattoo that I have on my side now and this idea that, you know, I get to choose what you see when you see me and that, it's like an exhilarating feeling, it makes me so - what's the word? - maybe more in touch, like more reconnected with my body, yeah.

Rachel: Jeannie I heard you describe a number of emotions and, and sort of, phases of your experience of control when it comes to your body and what it looks like and how it's perceived by others. I also thought about my body when I, when I thought about this question and, and I also had some things that felt pretty good when I thought about that and some things that I was not comfortable with or not satisfied with. So, you know, one is I was recently reading the journal that I kept when I was twelve years old and I was shocked to find that as a twelve-year-old I decide that I need to diet and I needed to lose five pounds. And this is a thing that - as someone who's lived my whole life as a woman in the United States, yeah I can't really remember a time when I didn't want to lose five pounds, and I was so sad to see that that, that was there when I was twelve. Right, I, I definitely remember having this feeling in high school of not being satisfied with my body - but I don't know, I know twelve-year-olds, they're so little - and so that kind of broke my heart but I also thought, like, well, as a kid you don't have control over a lot of things and so maybe this was, like, a socially acceptable way to have control over my life. A thing that came to mind also in terms of having control over my body and my choices was how grateful I am to have, I have an IUD which is this, you know, long-term form of birth control. And as a woman of pretty high SES my health insurance covered it and that has felt like a way that I have control over my body that's let me have the life that I want. I don't want kids right now and, but I do want to be in romantic and sexual relationships, so, you know, being able to have that felt really powerful. And, you know, because that's connected to reproductive health care, a thing that feels like it could also be taken away: being in the United States right now and conversations about the Supreme Court and whether abortion will continue to be a thing that people in this country have access to. Which is making me think of one other experience where my control over my body felt really tenuous: I was a teenager and the guy that my mom was dating at the time, I remember he like - I think I had this adolescent invincibility, I think I, I had sort of imagined like if anything, if anyone ever tried to do anything to me I could be really like fierce and protect myself. And I remember that he, we were, like, in in the apartment and he, like, grabbed me from behind and I can't remember how this came about but I think he wanted me to have the message that, like, I was probably overimagining my own ability to protect myself. 'Cause I remember I tried to get him to stop and he wouldn't and I did, I had this, like, I was overcome by this feeling of panic and like, oh, I actually could not get out of this situation right now if I wanted to. So that was just another reminder of like, oh yeah, I have control over my body until I don't. Um, yeah

Jeannie: Yeah

Carley: Thank you for sharing that story, Rachel. It's making me think about certainty and, like, how does that play a role in what- how we view control? And I think also, you know, thinking about both of your stories, just about being in the bodies of women and how that relates to systems at large, you know, Rachel, you talked about birth control and reproductive healthcare and, and then Jeannie you talked about just knowing that you were going to go to college and knowing that, you know, you were going to be taken care of financially. And I guess I'm just wondering, like, how does that- what are the things that we know and how does that make us feel in control, maybe even when we're not? I don't really search too far outside of myself when I'm looking for things that I can control. I think that this is a big shift from when I was younger; I am the oldest sibling in my household so I had a lot of- I felt like I had a lot of control over other things in the house and other people in my house and really, like, kind of asserting power over my brothers was definitely a big way when I was younger. We have a large age gap between us so it was pretty easy to kind of be like, 'no you have to, like, go do this thing now' and they couldn't really argue back 'cause they were so young. But now that I'm, you know, out of the house and they're still back at home it really has turned into like an inward thing of like, OK, I then started trying so hard to control my emotions like all of the time and really only within, I would say, the past six months to a year have I really tried to, like, even let go of that. And recognizing like, your- my emotions are signals to so- like in response to some outside stimulus, so trying to suppress one emotion is not helping me identify the actual thing that needs to be controlled quote unquote, the actual thing that needs to be responded to. I guess I've tried to, like, in searching for things that I can control it's really been my relationship to controlling and trying to let go of that as much as possible, um, and like allowing myself to trust in who I am and my body and my heart to respond in the moment in a way that reflects what I need right then.

Jeannie: A thought that keeps bouncing around in my brain is that I'm hearing both of you talk about turning inwards to seek something to control and I'm wondering if, if it's like a socialization thing or if it's just a personality thing but, right, not everyone, I think, turns internally to seek something to control. Some people seek to control other people and they turn that outwards, which is not to say I never seek to control others but, by and large, I directed my controlling behaviors, some OK some less OK, towards myself. And I'm wondering if there is, like, a pattern in who learns to control others and who learns to control themselves as a way to, I don't know, cope with the uncertainty of the universe or whatever it is that that leads us to do this.

Carley: It just makes me think of my relationship with my dad a lot. So, my stepdad is white and my mom is black and, you know, they've been married for 15 years, together for 16, so basically most of my life. And I think about my, like, conflict styles and, like, I have a tendency to have a competing or directing like, 'I am right and I know I'm right and I just need other people to understand that I'm right and then the problem would be solved' and, you know, that really came from, I think, my dad and, like, the ways that we would talk in our house. You know he, he has a very unique perspective on the world and, you know, growing up with that it was like, you have to assert yourself, basically, was what I learned in my house and like

asserting yourself and advocating for yourself and being in control were all kind of conflated with one another. And so I think that, in terms of being a woman, I'm more likely to avoid a conversation if I don't think that I have the power to control it, and then in conversations when I do feel like maybe I have a little bit more power to control it I am less focused on collaborating or finding this sense of shared meaning and more, like, 'you need to understand my perspective and say that it is correct and then we can move forward' as opposed to really listening. And I think it's- that happens, I see that happening a lot more in terms of my conversations with my dad at this point than with other people but, yeah, it's really, it's really interesting to see how, kind of, my social identities as a woman, as a Black woman, come into play especially with, you know, this white man that I have such a close relationship with.

Rachel: So we've talked about how we, sort of, notice control showing up in our own individual experiences or our own relationships. I'm wondering where you see control showing up in society?

Jeannie: Oof, that's a big question...right I gotta think outside myself, let's think beyond just Jeannie and this body...I'm studying environment and sustainability as well as education - that is what I want to devote my life to, as of right now that's the plan - and so when I think about control in society I am thinking a lot about who controls the future, my future, our collective future as a species, as a planet. And, you know, I don't love the answer that comes to mind because a lot of it is these, you know, multibillion dollar, multinational conglomerates, oil companies, you know, maybe governments that are so large that sometimes I feel a little lost in them. And, I mean, that is the work that I'm in and the work that I love, but that's the reality of the current situation. And when I first started off on this campus I joined organizations, like activist organizations, and we started, I think, from a place of kind of bucking against these larger systems, and I really appreciate my time in them - I think they taught me a lot about, like, teamwork, collaboration, grit - but at the heart of it, I think I was still working from a place of loss and confusion and anger at the lack of control that I felt. You know, I felt like I was little me, like, just up against these larger, larger systems that I felt I could have no change in. And so ultimately, like, that wasn't personally sustainable for me, but since then I found some other ways to do the work that I care about and in the past year and a half, two years, have learned to start what I want to do and start the work that I do at a place of hope, and a place of love. It was actually, it was my summer job at the Cornell Botanic Gardens, they had sort of recently changed their strategic goals and their mission and it included hope, like explicitly stated hope, and that was the first time I had ever seen that. Like I had been studying environmental stuff for how many years and that felt like the first time I was told that it was OK to hope, it was OK to think that I could make a difference. So as I'm thinking about the work that I want to go on to do, you know, I want to never lose sight of the reality of what's going on in the world, never lose sight of how much control has been placed in, in these very very big bodies, let's say, that I don't necessarily always agree with - or agree with period. But also to, to not let myself think that I have no control, to think that I have no agency, to think that I have no ability to make a difference. I think that's what I love about education honestly, it's like I know my life is so small and so finite but if I can make one little change in each of the students that I interact

with, if I can help them grow themselves and help them grow other people then, like, I'm doing my part, you know, and maybe that's not what we're taught control looks like but for me I think that's, that's a small way to contribute to a future that I want to see and I think that's enough control for me. Like, that feels good.

Carley: Jeannie, that was so beautiful!

Jeannie: Thank you! The sun is setting, the sky is pink, I am deep in my feelings.

Carley: Yeah, I think, oh God, Jeannie what you said just resonates so much with me. I think that there are, you know, these huge systems that are very powerful and have lots of control and autonomy over each and every one of us. I mean, I think that this is a frequent thing that we hear especially nowadays where, you know, the world is so polarized and it's like, 'well whatever I do, like, it's not going to change anything' and this, like, 'my one vote is just a drop in the bucket, like, that's not going to decide who the president is.' And I feel so in opposition to that. I think about, I recently watched this documentary about Clarence Avant and it's a documentary on Netflix called The Black Godfather and...he is very old...

[laughter]

Carley: He, like, so many of, like, these Black icons knew him and got connected to the resources that they needed in order to become who they are through him, and yet so many people like don't super know who this guy is because he worked more on like admin/management side of things so he wasn't really out in the spotlight. But I remember watching that documentary and being like, this person had such an impact not only on, like, these individuals, but on Black culture as a whole. Like if, if he hadn't been in these peoples' lives then, like, we wouldn't have, you know, Barack Obama, Michelle Obama, like, Quincy Jones, like, these are the people that he's connected to. And it's like, wow, and I just I really felt connected in that moment to my own power as a single human being. Like, if all that I can do in this world is help someone in their own journey to finding their most authentic, autonomous being then, like, that, that changes the system, that changes the whole entire thing. I also have been thinking about my, how my SES plays a big role in what I can do to change the larger systems. I am fortunate enough to be higher SES and I have disposable income where I can pay a little bit more to support a small Black, Black-owned business as opposed to, like, buying something at Target. And so, you know, I've really been, like, this summer kind of overhauled the way that I, like, think about buying things and, like, yeah you know, I do have, I do have this income, like where am I putting my dollars and things of that nature? So I just think that it can feel very daunting to think about, like, I, I'm just one person and there is only so much that I can do in this life but I think that, you know, Martin Luther King Jr. was only one person, you know, Barack Obama was only one person, Trump is only one person. One person can have a huge impact.

Rachel: A thing that I'm hearing in what both of you shared is, yes, we are individual people but we're not individual people in isolation, right, we're connected to others and our choices have real impacts on the people around us and the systems around us. So whether it's who we are connected to in an education context and how we can help them think about things and themselves or how we choose to spend our dollars and what that means for, you know, independent Black-owned businesses. If everyone started making different choices, even though they're just individuals making choices, it would have a real broader impact. Um...I guess I want to undermine the thing I just said which is that everyone needs to make different choices in order to have an impact, and I think what I'm actually hearing from you is that even as an individual the choices I make, the choices that I can control, these things matter even, even if it's just me doing it.

Jeannie: As Carley was talking something came to mind for me, and it's this idea of reframing how, how we approach things: ourselves, one another, this world. And I'm thinking about control, as I understand it now, as something that is othering - it puts what I control away from me. And I'm thinking about, like, how we can replace that with, like, agency and connection and growth. I was thinking about, um, can you repeat his name, Carley? The man in documentary?

Carley: Clarence Avant.

Jeannie: Clarence Avant, right, and how, you know, it sounds like he, he was someone who was in a lot of control but that control wasn't domination over people: it was growth and it was support. And we're, you know, we're talking about education and how for us maybe control is giving agency to others and so, so what happens if everybody reframes control not as domination of another but as, you know, freedom and authenticity for themselves and for one another?

Rachel: Yeah, I think I will certainly be continuing to think about approaching control, whether it's intrapersonal control that I try to direct towards myself or interpersonal control, um, in a way that's not related in, in domination - Jeannie I think you used that word - in a way that supports, that is supportive and about cultivating not diminishing. This is a very interesting thing to imagine and I look forward to continuing to think about that. I'm grateful to you both for helping me think about this in a new way and for sharing your thoughts and feelings about control here on "I" Statements, a podcast made by Control – nope, Freudian slip! A podcast made by Cornell University's Intergroup Dialogue Project. If you have ideas for future episode topics we'd love to share control of this podcast with you, listeners, so please do send us an email. You can find our contact information and learn more about our program at our website [www.idp.cornell.edu](http://www.idp.cornell.edu). Thanks and bye.

Jeannie: Thanks and bye.

Carley: Thanks and bye.