

"I" Statements podcast – Episode 16 – Partnership
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Rachel: This is "I" Statements, a podcast where complexity, vulnerability and curiosity collide. In this episode we're talking about partnership. My name is Rachel, I use she/her pronouns and a word that comes to mind for me when I think about partnership is "possibility."

Danny: My name is Danny, I use he/him pronouns and the word that comes to mind for me when I think of partnership is "patience."

Dustin: And my name is Dustin, I use he/his pronouns, a word that comes to mind when I think about partnership is "respect." Seeing another as holding the same weight, seeing another as having something to contribute, seeing another as an equal in more ways than one, I think stems from this idea of respect. I think about how -isms can get in the way and when I say -isms I'm naming ageism, sexism, racism, credentialism is another that I've been thinking a lot about. But specifically around ageism, I can give an example: I'm 23 years old, I'm a graduate student, and it's sometimes difficult to be seen as a research thought partner. I'm relatively early in my research career, I don't have as much professional experience as my peers, specifically in graduate school, and it's been an interesting tension to have to manage those identities and surface different life experiences or code switch or, or in a way signal a sense of experience in order to be accepted as a partner, in order to be engaged as a thought partner in research. So that's just one that comes up for me.

Rachel: Dustin, hearing you describe yourself as someone who's pretty early in your research career and in this role as a graduate student and navigating the challenge of being taken seriously as a thought partner or scholar really resonates with my own experience in graduate school. I do remember feeling so frustrated by the idea that I wasn't being taken seriously by my advisors so I actually switched advisors after my first year in graduate school and started working with someone who - my number one criteria like when I was looking for a new advisor was like who is going to take me seriously? Who is going to treat me like a partner? In academia in particular where there are clear hierarchies based on role – faculty, graduate students, undergraduate students - having to navigate those roles in a way that is very easy to do if you treat each other like you belong in that hierarchy, and the challenge for me, and it sounds like a challenge for you, is trying to find people who say, 'no, no, no, let's leave this hierarchy behind us and find a new way to connect with each other that is more equitable and grounded in partnership.' And I do think those people exist in academia but I do think they're hard to find, like I think one has to – I, I had to look for someone like that. Which I didn't really think about before I got to graduate school.

Danny: With the Intergroup Dialogue Project I was co-facilitating my first semester with a fifth- or sixth-time facilitator; I felt like I had these big shoes to fill. Dialogue has been essential to naming these dynamics, naming the impact of them and then strategizing for change, right, saying how can we get past this? Or for me to say, look here's where I see this power dynamic:

you just have more experience here and I trust you more to be able to do this. And then for my partner to say, 'hey like I'm so glad you're sharing these with me, like what can we do to change this or how can we collaborate and just like accommodate everybody's needs at once?' And then we talked about different kinds of change and then dialogue allows us to try different things, come back and say 'did that work?', give each other feedback and be able to trust the feedback. You know, I get defensive at times when I get feedback and to be able to have someone that I trust is the bread and butter for me in a partnership, right, like trust just goes all the way.

Dustin: I'm holding in that anecdote that you just shared how we're talking about different types of partnerships and in that one story I'm hearing a professional partnership, I'm also hearing a partnership in support, being there for each other when those things come up. How are you - and this is an open question, I'd love to hear your thoughts - you know, what are we actually talking about when we consider partnership? Is there a theme or is there a thread that goes through all of those different types of roles?

Rachel: In preparing for this I was trying to think, what is the line between friendship and partnership? What is the line between partnership and collaborator? Like is, you know, do these lines exist? And for me there's a productive element to partnership: we are making or doing something together, that's not always there for me in friendship. In friendship it's a lot more about support and joy and sharing things, but not necessarily creating either a relationship or a product or something together.

Danny: That's really interesting, Rachel. This is a really good question, like what do we define as like partnership? And for like, for me I'm a very extroverted person, I am this like super happy go lucky white cis gay male, for me it's very easy for me to enter a space and make it my own. So it's very easy for me to connect with people, but I find that the people that I consider partners, the ones that I go further with, I guess or I see as like closer to me, are really the ones that I'm like, oh we share the same values of honesty, radical honesty, or we are looking to - in your terms of like productivity - like we want to accomplish some sort of goal together. And I'm trying to think of just like other, other examples of like how I've made friends into partners, but it's interesting for me it's hard to define like a clear cut time when I'm like "we're partners now" versus like we're just friends. Maybe it has to do with just the amount of time we spend together, you know I think it becomes like a natural thing. What are your thoughts on this?

Dustin: I, I'm struck because I'm really resonating with that idea of transitioning friends to become partners. That opportunity to come together, build a container where play is happening, where magic is happening. And there's something about going through something together that creates that partnership, there's something about coming together towards a goal, there's something about creating a sense of a social contract, a sense that we've proven to each other that we are going to be partners in this activity, be partners in this goal. In my mind I'm thinking about business partnerships, how when I hear my friends who are becoming business partners with each other, they sit down and they sign a contract. I'm thinking about,

thinking about romantic partnerships where my partner and I, when we started dating, we had a real conversation about it and we established, hey we're going to become each other's partners, and the definition of saying, 'hey I'm going to call you my partner.' There's a sense that in order for a partnership to occur both must agree to it, and for a successful partnership to flourish I'm hearing there needs to be an agreement of what that partnership will manifest.

Danny: It's funny hearing you talk about this because it brings me to these conversations I had with my friends, right, who maybe they have like a fling or they're seeing somebody, a hookup, and they go - or they're seeing someone extendedly, for an extended period of time and the question becomes have you DTRed? Have you defined -?

Dustin: Have you defined the relationship?

Danny: Exactly. It's always such, like a very, like, I can see people get visibly stressed just by that question, "have you DTRed?" And there's so much weight in defining a relationship, I feel like because I think I've had to bring in, in the past, like, what my expectations of a partnership are and those can be largely informed by social identity, my experiences, my principles, values even my shortcomings, right, things that haven't worked in the past. And being able to say like, 'look this is what I need in a partner,' and that's really vulnerable and often uncomfortable to like bring in. So I think maybe partnership comes down to trust, maybe it's like I, I'm at the point where I can be that person, I can say these things, I can say look like, I, I need somebody who I can talk to everyday, or I need somebody I can't talk to every day, I need somebody that's just going to be there for me even if we don't text or call, right, like if I talk to you once a month I'm happy about it. I don't know.

Dustin: I'm really struck because I am now thinking about how some partnerships are time-bound and project-bound and some transcend that. I think it's interesting, when I think about the people who I call partners in my life - thought partners, life partners - my goodness, it's not, it's not time-bound, there is, there is a longevity to it. So I'm going back to Danny's first word of patience and when I think about the three words that we started with, patience, respect, and possibility, I'm thinking about how those norms can evolve, I'm thinking how a partnership can grow, and I'm also appreciating that those norms and those expectations can change dramatically. I think when we end a partnership it's not just that someone is no longer providing what they had promised, sometimes it's what- our needs are changing to the point where it may be better to have joy in dissolving a partnership, it may have - be a moment of joy to, cathartic in some ways to say, hey maybe we don't want to place all this energy and all of this weight in this relationship that's no longer lifegiving.

Danny: I've definitely had experiences in the past with like romantic partners where I'm like, I'm doing 90% of the work, I'm looking for just 10%, can you put in 10% for me please? Like I know I can bring commitment and devotion to my partner. I think this is largely informed by how I see my parents. Like when they got married they had four boys, they had to work through a lot

of things and the one thing, unwavering, was always their commitment to each other. At the end of the day, no matter how hard things got, we were still a six-person family. We would come home and we worked through these things, right, or if we didn't work through them we let them sit and we - they were there, and we were, still committed to the staying together, or my parents were at least. So for me I think I model a lot of this after like my parents in the sense that like when there's a problem I'm committed to trying to figure it out. I'm a problem solver. I want to get to the root of these things so I tend to put in like a lot of work and effort because I'm, I'm a believer in that like things can change, you know, no matter what. And I've had partnerships where that created a power imbalance where someone was pulling out and they were saying, you know, 'I don't think I can do this' or 'my needs aren't being met' and then I'm the one taking control of the situation and saying like, 'I'm the one who's dictating how we should get through this' and ultimately it blew up in my face, as it does. But it was, you know, something to learn from and something to grow from. So at one point I was doing long-distance with my partner and I could tell we were getting more and more disconnected as the days went on, like our calls were very surface level it was like, 'how was your day?' nothing's changed, right, and I was pushing pushing pushing or 'is everything OK? are we OK? what's going on?' My partner's like, 'we're fine, it's fine, like I'm fine' and I'm like, 'no like it's not fine, we're disconnected. I can tell. I've seen this before, I know when you get disconnected.' Right it's, it's this thing of knowing my partner too. At one point I was like, 'I have a feeling you're going to end this' and it became kind of a conversation of like, 'well it feels kind of dead right now' and then we kind of ended things as it was. So this power imbalance where I was pushing pushing pushing increased this like retreat retreat retreat from my partner and it was just ultimately we had to call it quits.

Rachel: I hear in that, Danny, a couple of examples of how power can work in relationships that I hadn't really thought about before this, so I'm grateful for that. So I heard that there's power in a partnership in the person doing the work and so if I, you described yourself as, if I'm doing 90% of the work I actually have a lot of power over how we're connecting to each other, what we're doing, you know I'm imagining this could play out in professional partnerships as well as romantic partnerships. I'm doing 90% of the work, I have a lot of control, or at least I perceive myself as having a lot of control. And you also mentioned this idea of "what is the story of this partnership?" and the power in being able to tell that story. So you said you were having your own personal doubts and then your partner was saying, 'no no, things are fine.' Like that, to me, also feels like an exertion of power in partnership is saying 'this is how this relationship is going,' and one person being able to set that narrative is also a form of power.

Dustin: I feel like I'm in couples therapy and I love it. I love it. I'm really resonating with the idea that power can come up in so many different shapes and forms and the idea that power is often seen in a negative light when in actuality power is what we need to build, power is what we need to make, power is what we need to create. There are so many ways in which power shows up in a partnership, I'm trying to think about how even with one person I can have a feeling of an imbalance of power within a partnership because I'm not showing my full self to the table. So I'll ground this in an example: I had an opportunity to teach abroad and I

remember working with a mentor who was in a very formal capacity, had longer time at the school than I did, had more experience teaching, power in a lot of different ways. And yet in the classroom we managed to be partners in teaching. And I'm trying to think about how context changes the way in which I'm seeing power, how in one room - the teacher room - there was a clear power imbalance, but in the classroom we were partners in helping shepherd learning. Like how does that show up for you folks? How does that show up where one person can hold an- a tremendous amount of power in one in one arm, you know, an incredible amount of partnership in the other leg, and then confusing dynamics all around?

Rachel: I appreciate the way that this question makes explicit the fact that relationships exist across contexts. And then I think, too, about your example, Danny, of your parents and how some of the contexts that their partnership crossed were being spouses, and being parents, and whatever other contexts their partnership might have spanned. Those contexts make different demands of us and so what are the ways to be flexible and where are we not flexible? Even if this partnership is ostensibly the same because it's the same people involved, the way we show up in this partnership might change depending on the context.

Dustin: Rachel, that last piece around how showing up different can sometimes make a partnership successful is something that's really resonating with me. I'm thinking a lot about how sometimes we need to contort ourselves or show up as our half-selves in order to make a partnership work. I'm thinking about moments where I needed to hide a social identity in order to make a partnership work. I'm thinking about moments where I was engaged in a formal partnership, professional partnership, where there were really homophobic things said in the workplace and where, out of fear and out of a desire to make the partnership work, I didn't disclose that I was a gay man, right, I didn't share that part of myself or I didn't show up as my fullest self because I wanted that partnership to work. And I'm struggling now as we're having this conversation, you know, what actually makes a great partnership? Is it when you can bring your fullest self to the table? Because as we've explored, these different dimensions of partnerships - professional partnerships, work partnerships, romantic partnerships - I'm thinking about another level of partnerships beyond those labels as people who I would call my partners period. And for me, what makes a great partner for me is an opportunity for me to bring my fullest self to the table, to bring my most vulnerable self to the table, and to have someone, a place where I can go and feel as though I'm at home, a place where I feel as though I can be seen, heard, and respected. So passing that off to you two, you know, what one, what makes a great partnership and two, you know, what does it mean to show up at your fullest self in a partnership and how do we how do we make sense of that?

Danny: I'm like seeing experiences flash before my eyes right now where I'm like, ooh I'm uncomfortable! Like I'm just thinking about the ways I showed up or, I don't know, things I wish I could have done differently, right. And something that I was thinking about was how I said before partnership, to me, like hits those values and principles, that core, right, as to who I am and I want that to match with somebody. So I'm thinking about a time where I visited my partner in their home which was across the country and there was a very, very large dynamic

here in the sense that I was visiting a family but there was a very big socioeconomic status dynamic, right; I come from a very high socioeconomic status background and my partner came from very low socioeconomic status background. And then entering the different space where my part- my partner had always been in the high SES, high socioeconomic status, space and was always seeing me perform authentically there and I always thought of them as being super authentic to that place. And then going to their context and being like, whoa, like this is, like I understand you a little bit more now. I see the ways that you interact with the world.

Rachel: The way you started that, Danny, in terms of thinking about like how your partnerships have changed over time as you sort of, again like, see the same person but in different contexts or see yourself with that person in different contexts, it's making me wonder how you both would answer this question of whether or not partnership is a skill? Is this something that we can get better at over time?

Danny: I don't know! That's like, it's, for me that is a question that is like one of my anxieties and insecurities, right. Like, like if we get past this problem, is another one come across, right? How good are we just managing conflict versus like, like what is the capacity for conflict in a partnership, right? What is healthy and what is unhealthy? And like, and if it's an unhealthy or if it's something that you know isn't working, how am I going to find a person, a partner where it is going to be healthy? And I'm thinking of romantic partners, questioning you know, if we're going through a rough patch or if some needs just aren't being met, where is the line between this isn't working and like naming that? And, 'cause like I said before, I'm a committed person, I want to push past this and I'm always trying to find ways to manage conflict. And for some people depending on the conflict it, you know, you can only do so much. So like I said before I like your question it, it makes me uncomfortable because it's not something I'm adept at right, like as a skill I don't, I don't want to develop this skill I just want to have it. And yeah, it's, it's scary the idea of like, I don't know, failing at partnership.

Dustin: When I think about my partners, throughout this conversation I'm thinking about each of them independently, I think it's very hard for me to find the thread because I think the building, the foundations of those partnerships were all so different. And I think what's special about the question that you just asked, Rachel, it's made me realize the rarity of partnerships, the rarity of true partnerships and the rarity of my ability to show up my fullest self in those relationships where I would name and say, 'yep, that's a partner.' When I think about how we can build more partnerships, I don't know if that's a need. I'm considering how the opportunity to build relationships, the opportunity to build connections is certainly something that we can build through dialogue. There is something about not forcing partnerships, not forcing relationships to become or evolve into this ideal version of partnership that we've been describing, and this idea that they are unique moments where magic happens, they should be nurtured, they should be appreciated, but they should never be forced.

Rachel: Yeah, absolutely. I think you're touching on a thing that, for me, when I think about partnership as a skill, it's recognizing when those ingredients are there. Do I show up in a way

that does that nurturing work? Do I show up authentically? So when I think about partnership as a skill I'm thinking about mostly how I show up and not necessarily doing more of it, but doing it better. And so have I found myself over time to become a better partner to the people I'm partners with? I think so. Because I'm realizing the importance of articulating what I need, articulating my boundaries, being humble, being attentive to the way that power is showing up in our partnership, and having candid conversations about that. I think those are things I've become more practiced at over time and, having learned from what did not work well in the past, realizing that I'm more satisfied in those partnerships and I think they're more in line with how I want to live my life if I show up in those ways. But it's taken decades to, you know, begin to recognize the importance of that and I'm by no means done so I anticipate that I'll continue to learn about partnerships over time by being connected to people in this way. I do want to ask, what's sticking with you as we approach the end of this this conversation about partnership?

Dustin: I'm holding this intention of really recognizing the value of the word "partnership," really recognizing the value of the word "partner," and I'm realizing through our conversation that what a partner is is a personal definition, what a partner should be is a personal conception, what a successful partnership looks like is also very context specific, and what I'm walking away with is an intention to clarify that for myself. I think this conversation, for me, has opened up hundreds of other questions I have about the partners or the partners that I call partners in my life and my intention to self is really center in on what fills me up, what gives me energy, what partnerships are really worth investing in and how do I make sure that I'm watering the plants that need to be watered and I'm plucking the weeds that actually are sucking away from my ability to show up the most authentically and show up most fully to those that are lifegiving? So I'm walking away with an intention of trying to figure out what a good partner means, what a good partner looks like, and how I can use that word with more weight moving forward.

Danny: My takeaway from this conversation is, you know, partnership is a dialogue. It's being able to really create and understand shared meaning of what partnership is and just who we are. I don't know who I am, like I'm 22 and I've spent the last three and a half years of my college experience figuring out who I am in some ways, but I think it's opened up more questions of like, who do I want to be? And a partnership gives me the agency to be able to explore that and trust somebody and say, you know, am I meeting this? Also investing in my partner and saying, you know, who do you want to be and how can I help you? So for me a partnership is just a dialogue where I can find somebody and we work towards that productive goal of who do we want to be.

Rachel: I'm feeling a sense of immense gratitude for the people in my life that I do consider to be partners and I will probably text them right after we're done recording because I'm not sure I thank them enough or articulate the real impact that they have on me and my life. Right now I want to thank you two for having been partners in this conversation. I really, I've really appreciated the questions and the reflections and the dwelling in ambiguity and asking

ourselves to interrogate things that we were maybe taking for granted about partnership. Dustin, I want to quickly plug that you have a podcast of your own and you're going to have some Intergroup Dialogue Project people on it!

Dustin: We're doing a podcast crossover so consider this a meta version of partnership! So looking forward to seeing what magic comes of that partnership.

Rachel: Yeah. What is your podcast called, where can people find it?

Dustin: It's Changemaker Compass Podcast. We talk with changemakers thinking about ways in which we can help equip young people to make social change in the world. You can listen on Spotify or check us out on Anchor.

Rachel: When you're done listening to this episode you can go check out Changemaker Compass, but this has been "I" Statements, a podcast from Cornell University's Intergroup Dialogue Project. Our cover art is by Brian Garner, our music is written and performed by Evan Wilhelms. We would love to hear from you, what you'd like to hear us talk about in future episodes - you can be our partners in figuring that out! You can find our email address and other information about our program at our website, www.idp.cornell.edu. Thanks and bye.