

"I" Statements podcast – Episode 21 – Visibility & Invisibility
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Rachel 0:05

This is "I Statements," a podcast where complexity, vulnerability and curiosity collide. In this episode we are talking about visibility and invisibility. My name is Rachel, I use she/her pronouns, and a word that comes to mind when I think about visibility and invisibility is "variable."

Christopher 0:24

Hello, everyone, my name is Christopher, I use he/him pronouns. And word that comes to mind when I think of visibility and invisibility is "ambiguity."

Claire 0:33

Hello, my name is Claire, I use she and her as my pronouns. And a word that comes to mind when I think of visibility or invisibility is "vulnerability." My first thought when I think about visibility or invisibility is my social identity of being transgender. When I go outside in the world, and I want to express my gender authentically, I definitely stand out among people. And I will be I will be looked at, or I will sometimes feel uneasy, or I'm sort of, well, the word was vulnerable, about the fact that I'm really noticed by people, and that I'm very obvious and I stand out.

Christopher 1:16

So my word ambiguity is, is a bit of the opposite of what Claire just described. I feel like my identities are often hidden in ways; they're always present and they definitely impact my behavior, and to the right observer they might not be hidden or invisible, and are quite visible. But not knowing you know, how much to share or how much is just instantly taken in by other people can leave me feeling both invisible and visible at the same time. And so I have ADHD, and that impacts my behavior in meetings and in lectures and all kinds of scenarios. And to other folks who might also have ADHD, they might recognize my fidgeting or my inattention in ways and feel okay with it, whereas others might see that and assume that I'm neurotypical, and judge me for it. And so it's both, it's visible in a way but - like the behavior is visible -but the, the diagnosis or the underlying reasons for that behavior are sometimes invisible to the right, or to certain people if that makes sense.

Rachel 2:50

Yeah, it sounds like not everyone is getting access to the same cues, or they're all getting the same information but they're not making the same kind of meaning out of it. And I think this is why I picked the word variable when I think about visibility and invisibility, because an identity like socioeconomic status, which requires some kind of disclosure for someone to know my experience with that, I like being able to choose what I share where that's less possible with some of my other social identities that have more visible cues like my race, or my gender. I

think I present as a cisgender female, I think people pick up on that. I look like a white person, I am a white person, I think people pick up on that. And so I don't feel as much potential agency or variability with those identities, but other ones like that are more concealable I feel more control over in some ways.

Claire 3:47

So I really like what both of you were saying about this sort of dichotomy of social identities being instantly apparent to those around you versus ones that you have to intentionally disclose. There's also this pressure that I think you guys are sort of airing out that there are some things that you simply cannot turn off. At least in my case, if I wanted to, I feel like I'm personally in a very - my gender identity is in a very interesting sort of in between of visibility and invisibility; I actually retain the ability to mask myself for the time being as a cisgender man, and to completely blend in unnoticed. And I feel like that is in some senses of privilege that I have that in the right context. For example, if I'm ever feeling unsafe in a particular situation, I have the ability to simply change my clothes. But at the same time, I also I don't know how much ability I really have to hide this because I don't want to be closeted and I don't want to have to force myself to only wear particular clothing or to not express myself authentically. And in that sense, if I want to be my authentic self, then I have no choice in who I do and do not expose myself to.

Christopher 5:03

That really resonates with me, Claire. I come from a Jewish family on one side and, well, in general, I am mixed race, mixed ethnicity, mixed religion. And the portion Claire, that you brought up about safety and hiding, I certainly feel in certain contexts, in certain situations and travel around the United States and around the world, there are aspects of my heritage that I do need to hide. And I can do that as a sometimes white passing, tall man, cisgendered man. And I, I'd prefer to be visible for who I am, definitely, but safety, my safety makes me hide aspects of my identity, and become invisible in those ways. I'd prefer to be able to be my authentic self at all times, but we're all sort of forced - whether it be my ADHD or anything - to conform to standards, typical standards.

Rachel 6:29

This idea you're bringing up of standards or the status quo is something that comes up for me when I think about visibility and invisibility. And thinking of things, the things that are most visible to me are those that go against my expectations or what I see as the norm. I'm not proud of this, but I've noticed that when I'm walking down the street and I see a person of color, I start thinking about race. And that doesn't happen to me when I see white people, and I don't know if that's because I'm white, or because I grew up in a predominantly white part of the United States, or because I grew up in the United States which treats white people like the default, or if it's some combination of all those, but I've noticed that about myself. I've noticed that when I see someone on the street whose gender presentation doesn't clearly align with a binary like, you know, can tell by looking at them that I guess they're a man or I guess they're a

woman, that I start thinking about gender. It's clear to me that, you know, that this not aligning with what I'm expecting to see heightens the visibility of that person, that identity for me. And that's usually a cue to me to be like, oh, I've been taught that people are a certain way, this person is showing up in a way that's different from what I expected, and I wonder where I learned that people are supposed to be this certain way.

Claire 7:51

I really appreciate, Rachel, the, the vulnerability of talking about experiences that you're not necessarily proud of in terms of where you find yourself noticing people. So I came out this summer. So over the summer, and continued now, I'm in, I'm in sort of a period of you'd call it gender euphoria, where I'm just sort of like on cloud nine when I'm presenting with my affirming - like when I wear gender affirming clothing, for example. So this is leading me to dressing very, very, like hyper-feminine. For example, when I went home to visit my friends when I had just recently come out, like fully in the public, I went with them to this Chinese restaurant and I was wearing this like very fancy, well, that's not very fancy, but I was wearing this like nice green dress, like it was the kind of thing that you would definitely not wear to like a normal restaurant, but I was just like, I was so excited to have this dress so I ended up wearing it. So I was walking by and this woman like stares at me for probably multiple seconds as I'm walking by and like tracks me. I have definitely been conditioned that you know, it's not nice to stare at people. And I feel like for that reason people tend to steal glances at me or they'll like stare at me and then they'll catch themselves and they'll like stop and I just - the thing that part of the reason this jumps out in my memory is just the complete, like it was - I think "egregious" has a negative connotation to it - but it was like very like blatant that this woman was like very obviously staring at me and she was making no attempt to hide it. So I found that very interesting. I definitely get stared out a lot, but the majority of times it's just people sort of stealing glances at me, right. And something that really helped me come to terms with this experience was I was sitting in my dorm and I was doing work and this person was wearing a dress. And it did not look like the typical person I would expect to be wearing a dress, so I don't want to assume that they were transgender or gender nonconforming, they may have just been a cis woman who looked like, not like the typical cis woman. But essentially this person I think, was gender nonconforming. And I was sitting there and in my head like bolted to the right, like, in like, I was egregious, do you know what I mean? And I think if you had read my facial expression it would have been shock. After like two seconds and this person had already walked by, like they're walking down the stairs, I was like 'No,' like I'm in like, 'Why do I have to be wearing boy clothes right now?' In that moment, I was like, I wish that this person could have seen that I was not like, because I from this person's perspective, I was just another person that was staring at her - at them. And that that's like, I feel like I have a lot of empathy for that now like, oh, like that, like, that's my bad. And, um, especially in the transgender community, there is definitely a very interesting relationship with visibility and visibility. It is very possible that one of the people I saw who stared at me, right, was a transgender person who either was in my situation, right, or possibly was wearing their gender affirming clothing and was presenting in a way that they completely passed as the gender that they identified with. But it will be a really interesting thing that if I can actually pass at some

point in the future, like how that is going to impact my relationship with like, how I view visibility and invisibility.

Christopher 11:24

Claire, I feel like what I heard in some of your story, especially when you saw that person that was wearing, like, feminine clothes, and you wanted to be able to identify with them and show you're part of the of the group, right? I, I find myself doing that a lot. And it's hard to know sometimes how to do that, when I'm ambiguously, like a lot of my identities are ambiguous. And I first will tell a little bit of a story of like, you know how I felt that too: I have a lot of tattoos and all of my tattoos are hidden. And so I often see people with tattoos, and a lot of people with visible tattoos don't like getting stared at because of their tattoos. But I appreciate the work. And I sometimes would think to unbutton my shirt, and be like, 'Look, I have a chest tattoo too, you know, and I'm not staring at you, because I'm judging you. I'm staring at you because I'm appreciating the beauty of your work.' And I also think of the times when I can't easily, you know, unbutton my shirt as a metaphor. My grandfather's Black, I grew up with a lot of Black family, and identify with a lot of Black culture, and I sometimes wish I could more quickly identify myself as having that heritage and having that connection with other Black folks. Yeah, as much as I benefit from ambiguity being tall, white-passing, cisgendered man, I yeah, I miss the potential connections that I could have if I were more quickly identifiable as having the identities that I do have. But I also some things that were said brought up this idea for me of utilizing the power that comes with my most visible identities. Because I am taller and white-passing and male I often get - my voice is often louder, you know, metaphorically in a room and it feels to me like I am sometimes taken more seriously than my other colleagues. And I try my best to utilize that position of power to advocate for my lesser visible identities. I grew up in a low socioeconomic status and, yeah, I think that's one of my least visible identities now being a graduate student at Cornell, but I think, I don't know; there's a lot of aspects I've learned being at an Ivy League school around money and around tradition of having money that I don't fit in with. So I guess that all goes back to this idea of ambiguity and not even really being sure myself what people are seeing of me. Because I feel like I almost fit in in so many ways and yet, people still ask me questions like, What are you? And every time somebody asks me what I am, then I know I don't quite fit in to their normal, their standards of normality for a white man. Perhaps

Rachel 15:47

A couple of things you said really are sticking with me. And so one was this comment about your voice being heard and another one was about being unsure whether or how you're being seen. And that really reminded me of an experience I had in some committee meeting on campus, his was years ago, and what I remember is that it's a pretty small group, maybe 10 to 12 people, most people I would guess, are older white men, just by looking at them and hearing them, and so fewer women and fewer young people. And so I was a young person and a woman and we were talking about crafting a mission statement, and what we were talking about was like a page-long thing and I was like, I don't really think this is a mission statement.

And so I said, at one point, 'The things we've outlined in this first paragraph to me feel like they accomplish what we need from a mission statement.' And the conversation just keeps going. And I'm sitting there going, did they not hear me? Like, I genuinely can't tell if I wasn't heard, because no one reacted like I had said anything, the conversation continues in the same, like, let's talk about this whole page. And I finally said, like, I'm gonna repeat myself, like, I'm gonna basically just say exactly what I said before and see what happens. And again, nothing like no, no impact on the conversation, no acknowledgement. And so then I'm really like, okay, either this is a dumb point that I've now brought up twice because no one is paying any attention to it, or I'm genuinely not being heard. I bring it up a third time and someone finally goes, 'Oh that makes sense, let's, you know, shift how we're how we're talking about this, this whole statement.' And it was only because I was kind of familiar with this idea that some people's voices aren't heard, or some people aren't heard as readily in a given space. And so I know this is auditory and not visual, but I felt so invisible in that moment, and kind of kept insisting on being seen. And there was so much self doubt there; I really couldn't tell if I was being annoying, and repetitive or if I that's what I needed to do in order to make myself heard. So that's what came to mind for me when I when I heard you talking about that.

Claire 18:04

So I'm going to start off with, I'm going to go a little outside of my comfort zone, and I'm going to try to answer this in a different voice. So I think that what you said about you know, this is auditory and not visual really stuck out to me, because voice is something that is very top of my mind, awareness at the moment. About 10 days ago, I started trying to change my voice. And it feels like I wake up in the morning, it was especially bad and like the first few days, I felt like someone took a fork and they put it down my throat and they raked my vocal cords. Like that's how sore my voice was. Because it's like muscles I've never tried to use like this. And the issue I'm getting into: I would have loved if I could do this, have done this whole podcast in this sort of tone. But my stamina is really bad. So I'm sort of mentally preparing for a future time in my life where I'm- maybe I'm on hormones and maybe I pass much better and I start to experience what it's like to really be a woman, to be interrupted or to not have my voice be heard. And it like I'm trying to mentally prepare for you know, getting that like fire from within myself, like no, like, you're gonna listen to me, like, I like I know exactly what's happening because I have lived the other side of this coin. I don't want to be interrupted or to not be listened to or to be disrespected and to be you know, to be invisible because of my gender. So that was something that like, I feel like that was really um, that really struck a chord with a what you're saying. So I want to take a sort of right turn if that's sounds good with everyone. Um, okay, I need to I need to give my voice a break. In high school, like, I was sitting in math class, and I was hearing these two people talk very loudly, very openly about like, how like how stupid it is that like some people get extra time on the SAT. And then if you need extra time, you're just stupid and that they shouldn't, like, no one's gonna make extra time for you in the real world, and that you're basically just cheating and that like, you know, blah, blah, blah. And I was sitting there as someone who gets extra time and as someone who probably could not function academically without extra time and without very significant accommodation. And that's a time when I feel really invisible. And like, that's the time when I feel like I have the exact

opposite of my trans like relationship with visibility or invisibility. And then one more thing I'll say on disability, which is not exactly related to invisibility or visibility, is I really feel the impact of the intersection of my socioeconomic privilege and my ability or disability. Because I talk about how, you know, my disability doesn't really affect my daily life and it's something that I feel very well accommodated on. But I was in at least six years of occupational therapy from the time that I was very young and multiple years of physical therapy. And like without those things, and especially without the occupational therapy, like I don't think I would probably be able to write even slightly legibly without the immense amount of like, probably very, very expensive therapy that I underwent. This would not be a minor thing that like is just an annoyance, it would probably be a pretty major part of my life. But it's because of that intersection that I'm able to say that this is a pretty minor thing and I'm able to sort of downplay it, and to hide in my invisibility, in that sense.

Christopher 21:37

So I mentioned that I have ADHD, but I was only diagnosed two years ago, and I'm 34 years old now. So I made it 32 years of my life struggling with ADHD, looking back, but going undiagnosed. I went back to school to, to finish an undergraduate degree at 25. And those around me were using ADHD medications off script, so using them to study and perform in college. And that stigma alone, even though I had ideas that I was likely, that I likely had ADHD, kept me from seeking help for it. Because I didn't want to- because of the stigma of cheating, of using these things to sort of cheat the system, to gain an advantage that, to me, felt unfair. And so I just did it on my own, and I self-medicated with lots of caffeine and quiet hours in a library. And so that was my way of coping. But I think without the stigma- and I think there was also a stigma that my mom had growing up against medicating children which caused her not to have me diagnosed. But I always struggled in school. I always got, I was able to get good grades on things. But I couldn't sit still in class because I would just get bored because it took me five minutes to learn something that we'd spend an hour on, or three hours or two days. And I never understood why I needed to spend that much time on things so I wouldn't. But yeah, I think yeah, I think I mean, I'm obviously happy with where I am now but I wonder with the right medications and therapy or treatments, where I, where I could be, where I would be now.

Claire 24:04

I'll sort of connect it to an identity I have in maybe a sort of strange way, which was sort of thinking about how would my life have been different if I had been- realized that I was transgender earlier. I think that living with the wrong gender identity has created a lot of like, I've had a lot of painful experiences as a result of that. In high school, I used to just sit there on my phone all day, or I would go home and I just plugged myself into my computer and I'd play video games, like all day. Because I couldn't, like, I was so unhappy and I didn't understand why and I was so frustrated. Like, why, I didn't understand why. Um, I think that something that I like to sort of tell myself is, you know, it may be a little late for me, but at least I knew at some point. So obviously, I don't want to at all undermine what you were saying Christopher, or to

mitigate that experience. But I think the thing that helps me is like, you know, at least, I am actually incredibly happy to hear that you were diagnosed at an old age. The, the issue that I feel like that is all too common is once you get older than 10 and now they just think that you only want to pretend you have ADHD so that you can get meds. So obviously, I don't mean to at all mitigate the experience and the and the pain that goes with being undiagnosed. But I actually am very happy to hear that someone was diagnosed at an old age.

Christopher 25:33

Can I just make a funny comment, an observation: that I'm going to fully ignore that you called 34 old age?

Rachel 25:42

[laughter] I was gonna say.

Claire 25:44

I'm sorry, I'm sorry. I'm sorry. That was that was... Yeah, you're right. You're right.

Rachel 25:50

You really doubled down on it, Claire. [laughter] Like I cracked up when you first said it. And then, I'm 35 and I was like, Oh, god, what does she think of me?

Claire 25:59

You guys are very right to call me out on that. Like, I think I only say very old age because I'm comparing it to being like, eight. That's how I'll defend myself. But you know, yeah, yeah.

Rachel 26:11

We could talk about geriatric millennials all we want, but um, I, I, there is a thing that I have been feeling curious about in listening to both of you talk, which is that it sounds like there's maybe some relief, or there's something uplifting, about being visible as yourself, right, or being visible in a way to others that's consistent with how you see yourself. And I'm wondering if, if one or both of you could say a little bit more about that?

Christopher 26:43

I find so much power in being visible for the real me, for all of my identities. And it's only recently that I feel comfortable sharing them. But even more than sharing them is having them acknowledged and heard and yeah, like, responded to. Because I think often we share our identities, and we share these really vulnerable parts of ourselves, and then they are glossed over or they are- nobody brings them up again, nobody checks in with you. And maybe some aspect of your identity is, or at least I found that sometimes, you know, the, a few years ago, on Cornell's campus, there was some antisemitic postings, and the friends that I have that know that I have Jewish ancestry didn't check in with me about that. And I think now there's more community that's willing to check in and willing to respond, but I think so often those identities

were heard and then ignored. I want them heard and seen and then acknowledged and not, not made invisible again. Like thanks for sharing, but now I'm going to just view you back to being quote unquote, normal, or something. But this is all stuff that I'm still unpacking and still thinking about and trying to come to terms with. So I think I have a lot of half thoughts and unfinished ideas, but I'm so happy to be having this conversation and learning from you all.

Claire 28:35

My main takeaway - I don't have as profound an ending as Christopher did - I'm still really thinking about that idea of like, visibility and invisibility are so related to who we listen to, for example, and how, you know, visibility and invisibility is about you know, what social identity is, can you see it and can you not see, but it's also about, like, who is invisible or who is visible on the basis of their social identities? Like that was an angle that I was not thinking about before this podcast started, like, who, who do we hear from? Who do we see like, on the basis of their social identities rather than their merit or their character?

Rachel 29:17

I feel really grateful for what you both have shared in terms of your own experiences with visibility and invisibility, because in a lot of ways, they're derived from identities I don't have. And I know that it can be taxing to put yourself out there and that way, I certainly am grateful to feel like I know you both better. You know, I was coming at this with my own perspective on visibility and invisibility and so I feel enriched by having heard the way that you two have been thinking about it and noticing it in your own life, so...but we don't have time to cover everything here on "I" Statements, a podcast from Cornell University's Intergroup Dialogue Project. Our cover art is by Bryan Garner, our music is written and performed by Evan Wilhelms. We would love to hear from listeners with ideas about future episode topics so if you want to send us that can find our email address other information about our program at our website www.idp.cornell.edu. Yeah, thanks and bye.