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Rachel: This is "I" Statements, a podcast where complexity vulnerability and curiosity collide. In this episode we're talking about access. There are three of us here in the studio so let's take a moment to introduce ourselves; share your name, a little bit about your role, and one word that comes to mind for you when you think about access. I'm happy to start; my name is Rachel Sumner, I work in Cornell University's Intergroup Dialogue Project, or IDP, and a word that comes to mind for me when I think about access is "laws."

Ruju: My name is Ruju Dani, I'm an undergrad studying applied economics and management here at Cornell, I am a facilitator for the IDP program, and my word is "ease."

Stephen: And my name is Steven Kim, I'm a grad student here at Cornell in the English Department. I work also in Residential Life and with Cornell's Intergroup Dialogue Project. And my word is "power."

Rachel: Um, I realized that all the examples that came to mind for me when I started thinking about access were related to really formal kind of limits around access. I also thought about a lot of laws, right, so I was thinking in particular about access to things like bathrooms. You know, all the news coverage a few years ago around laws um related to bathrooms in North Carolina, aimed at limiting the access that transgender people have to the bathroom that they would like to have access to and deserve to have access to. And it just made me think about all the ways in which I just have access that I kind of take for granted, right; as a, as a cisgender person no one is trying to bar my access to very basic resources like a place to use the bathroom and as a straight person no one has limited my access to the institution of marriage. Those are the things that came to mind for me, and I realized they were really formal and, like I said, sort of legal, right, that's why my word was "laws," even though I know there are so many other ways that access can be limited or granted an informal ways.

Ruju: Back home my family is super active in, like, the Hindu community and we have, like, a temple back home and we preach that it is so open to so many different kinds of people. And this is true in essence but it can feel a little different in terms of how comfortable you feel in those settings, which is why I think my word was "ease," where I was like, transactionally a lot of different people are allowed to come into the temple, but in reality how comfortable you feel in a setting or if you feel like an only has a lot to

do with maybe, like, even mentally how much access you feel like you have to a particular culture.

Rachel: You just use this term feeling like an "only." What does that term mean?

Ruju: I think mentally it makes me feel like there's a lot more barriers between me being able to fit in, if like fitting in is my goal. When I first came to Dyson, which is like the applied economics and management school at Cornell, I noticed that my identities were not similar to, I want to say, a majority of people in the room in any particular classroom. And so in that regard I felt like an "only" and I kind of assumed that they may not be able to relate to experiences that I've had, even people in like student services, career services. The kinds of support that I thought I would need in a school I very quickly assumed that it would be harder for me to relate with people and be able to get it because I appearingly seemed like an "only" based on my identities.

Stephen: And there's a way in which if I feel like the only person of X identity per se in a room or if I feel vulnerable in that way, one of the reasons I feel vulnerable is because sometimes I've been in experiences where if, let's say, for example I'm the only person of color in a room, sometimes my contributions to any sort of conversation or if I'm asking for any kinds of resources or posing any questions, I'm not taken as seriously because whatever I'm saying is attributed to that, I guess, "only" identity, that "only" identity that's in play there. And whether or not people take you seriously and listen to you, I think for me at least, is a really important part of access because so much of that, so much of access is like, do people who have resources or people in power at institutions listen to you and do they take you seriously enough to really consider what you're saying or to deliver on any, sort of, any request that you have?

Rachel: You both just mentioned, um Ruju you talked about these concerns that maybe I can't get what I need here because I'm the only one, maybe the student services people, the career services people won't be able to connect with me or give me what I need because I have these identities. And Stephen, you mentioned, you know, if I'm the "only" person in the room people are assuming that what I say sort of represents the perspective of all people of color, or things like this. Um, how do you know? Right, because those both strike me as sort of assumptions that you're making, not that they're inaccurate or not that they're not valid, but how do you know?

Stephen: My first response to your question is I don't necessarily know. And Rachel, you're right in that I think, for me at least, that's an assumption that I'm making going into the room. And one of the reasons I guess I'm making those assumption is because

of the accrual of past experiences, and I don't know if it's something that I'm actively thinking all the time when I'm the "only" person in a room. Oftentimes it's sort of, just like this, it's almost bodily where I just feel, I feel more vulnerable. I feel, sometimes when I do walk in the room it's almost like, why was I feeling so uneasy in that interaction? and it's, like, later when I reflect on it, I went, "Oh, so this is, I was actually the only queer person in the room, I was the only person of color in the room," and, cognitively, it comes to me later sometimes.

Ruju: So we were talking earlier about how when we feel like we're the "only" the room it kind of seems like we are the point person for that particular identity, and I've been thinking a lot about how that sort of affects me as an individual to be, like, really just going into my own head in a way that, like, other people around me may not be or may not even really care, but I feel like this one particular identity has become so salient to me. Nowadays, like, on campus I'm in many spaces when I may be either the only person of color or the only woman or the only woman of color and I feel like that becomes so much in the forefront of my mind where I'm like, am I really focusing on, like, what is, like, the goal of why we're even gathered here? Like if I'm lacking confidence I sometimes find myself saying, let's say that I did feel like I belonged in this particular room: how would that affect the confidence that I walked in with? And so I find myself sort of prepping my mindset going into certain spaces on campus where technically I have access to the same people, same, like, network as all the students around me, but in terms of communication styles or even just within me I feel like I have to access a different part of myself in order to really take advantage of it and fit in.

Rachel: I think I've also had access to numerous higher education scenarios and on college campuses I've always felt included because of my race - I'm a white person and have attended predominantly white institutions. But an identity where, even though I did have access, I hadn't felt included was I grew up in a low-income household situation. And I think that was definitely on my mind, right, because it felt like there were not messages that someone like me belonged at the school whether because of the purses, or the clothes, or things that fellow students had, or things that fellow students would say. I remember being in a sociology class in undergrad and a student saying, "Well, everyone on welfare is lazy." And the professor did not challenge this, no other students challenged this, and, like, part of me just seized up and I thought, do I say something? Like, do I, sort of, disclose that, like, my family had been on welfare when I was a kid and so I know that not everyone on welfare is lazy? And an identity like that, where the student who said this wouldn't look around the room and assume that anyone in that room had been part of that group that they were saying something about, this double-edged sort of: do I disclose that I'm part of that

group and what does that mean for how I engage and how I'm treated in this class for the rest of the semester, or do I sit here and say nothing and ruminate on it for 15-plus years (which is the option I chose). Um, they were wrong, right, and I could have said something in the moment like, "Well it's not, you can't make generalizations like that," right, I didn't have to disclose that this was part of my identity, but it felt so close to me that I couldn't even imagine that opportunity in that moment. The only option that seemed available to me was say something, like, about my family or not and, and you know, I think even when I think about access we had as a result of that government assistance programs when I was a kid, right, we had access to things like food stamps and stuff like that that made getting food more possible. So that's access there, right, but it still felt terrible because when I was growing up food stamps looked very different from other kinds of ways you could use currency at a cash register. I think now they've made it look more like a debit card so it's maybe less stigmatizing, but the access was there, but I think it still felt, um, like something serious was missing.

Stephen: Hearing about your story, it makes me think about the ways in which I have a lot of access because I'm fluent in speaking English. I do have access to resources, I can talk to people, I can read instructions on forms and if those instructions are unclear I know how to ask to make them clear for myself, I can advocate for myself very easily to any administrator at a university campus, to any sort of, in the legal system I know how to sort of speak up for myself. But that fluency, for me, often is usually doubted because of racial stereotypes about Asian Americans. I'm a, I'm an English PhD student, I have taught first-year writing seminars here and the way this is manifested is, "Are you qualified to teach me?" or, from parents, "Are you qualified to teach my children?" And it seems very abstract and intellectual but then, I think for me that, like, struck me really hard because the English language and English literature is something I've devoted at this point, for better or for worse, five years of my life to just in graduate school, and then just, sort of, to have that be almost discounted by the way that I looked before I even opened my mouth. And then, yeah, I'm in this weird situation later where it's like, do I prove I have access to all the things that English gives me in a way that sets up another power dynamic? Because then usually the thing that I'm pulling is, "I'm actually very highly educated not just in the English language but in the grand scheme of education itself I have a lot of cultural capital because literature and the arts are things that I study." And that also doesn't feel good and I'm honestly trying to figure out a way to respond to that that isn't making another power play or, like, in a way that it doesn't fall into that.

Ruju: Yeah, I think the language thing is sort of reminding me of things back home where, so my family is from the northern Indian state of Gujarat, so we speak

Gujrati, that's like our native language, and so I grew up with English and Gujarati but mainly Gujarati 'cause I grew up with my grandparents. But every time I visited India like my accent would still be made fun of because I had a very American accent and so it was very much like, I was trying to make sure that they knew that I knew both English and Gujarati, and maybe my accent's not right but I do know what you're saying and my parents have raised me well enough with both of these languages so don't doubt their parenting skills. And I think, I, I similarly felt really weird having to justify myself and I think part of that was because I felt like I was differentiating myself from the stereotype that they had about Indians being raised in America or even South Asians being raised in America, where I was like, you know, I'm not like these other children that are born without cultural influences or parents who try their hardest to instill their culture. And I was really trying to separate myself from that community. I don't know, I felt kind of dirty, I was like, well 'cause I do belong in multiple communities and it's so hard for me to vocalize that sometimes. So I really resonated with what you said.

Rachel: I hear so much in, in what you two shared about what other people think of us and needing to perform in a certain way that makes us convey the things that are important about ourselves to other people so that they know, but also being mindful of what existing hierarchies am I maybe reinforcing if I present myself in this way, right, in this already accepted kind of way. I think I feel this sometimes; as a white person I think people assume things about my life and then are really surprised to learn that I grew up in a low-income household because of all the stereotypes we have about who is poor in America. Sometimes I feel like I am performing something inauthentic if people don't know that about me because I can sense that they're making assumptions, because I have made those assumptions about other people. This is, you know, where, how I know that that happens is that I have done it: I have looked at people and said, Oh I think, I think I actually know a lot about you and then been shocked when, um, they disclose something that changes the way I think about them. And so for me a challenge is to be humble and try to at least recognize when I'm making those assumptions, but I can't do that all the time. I mean, it's just I, I don't think I have - and maybe I'm just not prioritizing it - but I don't think I have the cognitive capacity to always be trying to acknowledge assumptions I'm making at every moment.

Stephen: Yeah. I'm really drawn to what you're saying Rachel because it resonates a lot with me too. I'm now even thinking about all of the assumptions that I've made actually but you and Ruju as we're doing this podcast session. And you're people that I know relatively well, so even about, like, people that I know things about I am also making a lot of assumptions. But I also really resonated with the point about disclosure. Thinking

about which communities it's easier to disclose that I'm a part of in a given situation, because in certain contexts it's sometimes really easy to be part of a certain community. Um, if I'm with all of my queer friends, like a bunch of us gathered together for a conference in Hawaii really recently, like being queer was a lot easier. But there are certain contexts here at the University where I feel like I have to sort of tone all of that down. Like to disclose explicitly that I'm part of the queer community, that I identify as a gay man can be really difficult, and not necessarily in some ways because I know that people in front of me are holding certain beliefs about queer people but just, that setting just feels like a place where I don't belong for whatever reason. Um, any, like, formal University proceeding sometimes I'm just like, whoa it's like is, is being, is like being gay something that I can say here, um. And usually it is but then it's still that, like, when I step into the room, when I look at the setting, and like I don't know if I feel 100% comfortable saying or identifying myself as gay. In a way that I don't have to think about identifying myself as a man, like, because I'm a man, in certain spaces, like, that part of me feels welcome but then there are other parts of me that are indivisible from, that are indivisible that also feel sort of unwelcome. And then it feels like I'm being divided in a way that I shouldn't have to be or that I also can't be.

Rachel: Um we've talked a lot about how access can sort of be, be difficult or there can be a distance. What are times when you've had access and it's made you feel super super close to people? Having a PhD I have access to a very limited sphere of people who have chosen to pursue graduate school, who have pursued graduate school, um, I feel really close to those people! Some of my best friends are friends from graduate school. And I think having access to that institution made that possible. We all wanted to be there, we all got chosen to be there, and I'm, it's a flawed system but I'm really, really grateful for those individuals as friends.

Ruju: I think I'm thinking of my immediate friend groups back home and I think some of my closest friends were from, like, dance teams. And so I spent most of my, like, time with them whenever we were getting ready for a performance and then, I think, looking back on it now a lot of that was also because our families, like, had enough of the resources to, like, make sure that we knew this art - it was Indian classical dance, um an Indian classical dance form. And so on the one hand, we had sort of that instant cultural connection, but also, like, our families had the resources to sort of pay for those lessons and put us through that, and that ended up really bringing us together because of an identity that that we had access to this particular form.

Stephen: Yeah and I'm thinking, being a US citizen in this country, one of the things that it gave me access to was the way that I enjoy my marriage right now. My husband

was not a citizen, he needed status, and I was in a position to be able to offer him that. And I can imagine how difficult our relationship would actually be if that weren't the case, but because I was able to offer that, because I had access as a citizen to that path for him, I think that process of, like, going through this very bureaucratic and legal system together where immigration officials are testing whether they think it's a real relationship, like, that actually I think brought us closer because we were working through something together. We went through a high stakes process together that had a relatively, relatively good odds for an outcome, which isn't always the case for a lot of people moving through the immigration system, because of access as a US citizen. I can't say I enjoyed that process, but it's definitely, it's something that I feel good about being able to sort of enjoy that really, enjoy the security and stability that it gives for me and my husband.

Rachel: Um, the thing that drives me, like, that I just don't understand about access with some groups, but it comes to my mind most when I think about being a US citizen, is that it literally doesn't matter how I feel about being part of that group. I get access regardless. And I did nothing to get that access, right, I was born in the United States. I had zero input into whether that happened or not.

Ruju: I think that's made really apparent to me too because I was also born and raised here, just born with American citizenship. But I am hearing these messages from, with my family and the people around me about just how much more access they feel that they have because they've now been through this process of getting citizenship and they're noticing differences between, well, well, they have a notion of what the American dream is and they're trying to come here and figure out what that really means for themselves in real life. And I have not really been through any of that struggle, I was just kind of here and now I am able to do all the same things that they are able to do but without the effort so I, I think about that a lot too.

Stephen: Yeah, we can just be here. In maybe the most literal sense of that, we can be here without being worried about being shipped somewhere else if we don't fulfill the terms of an obligation or an agreement with the US, or if we don't, or we don't have to prove that we are, like, good enough to be here in any sort of way. And then that, sort of, living without that constant fear or doubt that I could be sent elsewhere, I think, is living without, like, a tremendous psychological burden, um, and then that, if we're thinking about access also, like, that actually frees up a lot of my own other cognitive space to be able to do other things. It frees up a lot of my time because I don't need to be poring over paperwork, um, as a student here or spending time figuring out what the terms of my visa are, or if I'm eligible for this kind of aid, or if I can apply for this

kind of internship or job. Like all of that energy I can put elsewhere and, if I'm being honest, I don't always use that energy well. Sometimes it's just like, I have free time so now I'm going to like sit on my couch and watch Netflix. But then it also means it's like, Oh, I can actually put extra energy towards, um, my classes or, um, looking for new opportunities or, um, making relationships with new people that I cherish and love.

Rachel: Um, so we have talked a lot about how access is limited and how we have benefited and struggled in some ways with those existing boundaries around access. There's not a finite amount of access in this world, right, presumably things could be changed to make it so more people have access to different environments or more environments. I'm curious to hear from you, you know, what do you think should be done to spread access more equitably?

Stephen: So I think the first one that I was thinking of just now, um, was how important it is to show up when groups are explaining why they haven't had access and what kinds of access they want in the future and how they want help in sort of advocating for that access. And showing up can mean showing up to a meeting but showing up, I think, can also mean sort of, like, seeking that information out for ourselves. The internet is a vast and glorious and wonderful place, and a lot of activists have labored over pieces that give this information to us and the magic of Google is that it's all at our fingertips in a way. For example, in The Sun, the Cornell Daily Sun today, which is the student-run newspaper, there was an article in there about physical accessibility, yeah, and then I'm...Sidenote: I'm sort of, I'm just, I'm sort of like how, like, for me at least, how did I go through this entire conversation about access without even bringing up accessibility? and then, oh that, after this I'm going to go back and reflect on my privilege as an able-bodied person. That's something that, also something that I'm learning and I'm also just, sort of, if I'm honest, a little ashamed that I didn't talk about that a lot more. But then, yeah, so showing up, reading, like, showing up I think can be reading and seeking out this information, and then showing up when these groups actually do advocate for themselves in settings across, especially across the university. For example, if groups are advocating for rights or for restitution because of previous, like, historical neglect or injustice to also show up to help facilitate access in that way as well. Like just having a bunch of bodies that look representative of the university, I think, is going to send a much stronger message in some ways than having a group of people who all look alike. So showing up was my first thing, my second thing was In addition to sharing information I think we can share connections. Many of the opportunities I got at Cornell were because people connected me to another, other people. An alum friend of mine connected me to one of my current work supervisors, her name is Xine she gave me a shoutout when she did her own podcast so now I'm

returning the favor and giving her a shoutout: Hi, Xine, I hope you're well across the pond! Yeah, and also just sometimes the seemingly random connections where I was just like, "Oh you're interested in this. I have another friend who's interested in this, do you wanna talk?" and they're like, "Yeah," and then it turned into a postgraduate job opportunity and I was like, that was not what I was intending this conversation to turn into, but I'm very glad it worked out for other people. I wish I were savvier in that way but, but like even those like, these acts of like connecting people to other people I think can facilitate access even just for the people that we directly know.

Ruju: Um, you were talking in the beginning about, um, sort of showing up even to different events and I don't know if I'm biased because I'm studying marketing but I was thinking a lot about how this idea of advocating for others' needs sounds a lot like marketing. And I don't know, I've been thinking a lot about how to use a lot of those same business principles in more of a social justice, social identities context and how it really kind of is, like, like, you need good marketing skills in order to deliver a message in a way that the people that you're trying to demand something from or get more needs from is able to understand you. And so I just, sitting in my marketing classes I'm thinking a lot about how I, like, can practice better allyship too.

Rachel: Do you want to be in charge of marketing for this podcast?

Ruju: Um, yeah. This podcast is brought to you by...

[laughter]

Rachel: Um, OK any, any final thoughts?

Stephen: Yeah, um, I guess one thing that, this, I'm leaving this podcast recording session thinking about - also besides all of my privilege - is, I guess now I'm just, maybe this is the English literature grad student side of me, but I'm just like, what does access mean? Like what is that word, it's a word that we throw around a lot and what do, what are the things that it's actually signaling or pointing to? And more interestingly, for me, I don't think there's, like, a right thing to call access. There's not, like, this is the thing that access is and all these other things aren't. But then what has happened to this word that it has sort of like proliferated in its meanings and are there any shifts in the ways that we're thinking about access moving forward and does that have any implications on the ways in which we think about how social identities fit into the University context? Does it have implications for the ways that we're also thinking about sort of allocating resources? Does it change the way that we think about

power? Power with my word so I'm bringing it back here, um. Yeah, there's so like our idea of access seems to be very much in flux and what does that mean for all the things that access is connected to as well, so as people are thinking about access to higher education, giving access to resources while people are in higher education, I think the idea of like what is higher education actually supposed to give people access to and then what does access actually mean? I think are really open, rich questions right now.

Rachel: Questions that we will undoubtedly explore in future episodes of "I" Statements, a podcast made by Cornell University's Intergroup Dialogue Project. If you're curious to learn more about our program please visit www.idp.cornell.edu, thanks and bye.

Stephen: Please like, subscribe, whatever it is that the youth are doing at this point...

Ruju: Hit it, DJ

[laughter]