

"I" Statements podcast – Episode 20 – Authenticity
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Rachel (0:05)

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

Trevor (0:21)

My name is Trevor, I use he/him pronouns, and a word that comes to my mind when I think about authenticity is "self-actualization."

Janani (0:30)

My name is Janani, I use she/her/hers pronouns and my word for authenticity is "harmony." When I think about spaces and moments when I felt authentic, it feels like there's a sense of connection and balance between my inner and outer worlds. I'm thinking about instances where I have felt accepted in the sense that I've been able to talk about life experiences in a group of friends, or a group of colleagues, who are able to either relate to my experiences, or they feel curious about my experiences, even if they don't directly relate to them. Which makes me feel like I can be vulnerable and share parts of myself that I choose not to share when I first meet someone,

Trevor (1:20)

I really like that word, harmony as it relates to matching your inside and outside. That puts your finger on something that I've been thinking about when it relates to authenticity: I chose self-actualization because, as I think about authenticity, I consider its boundaries. I wouldn't consider my ability to be authentic as taking priority over somebody else's either autonomy or their respect or their dignity. And so authenticity has its boundaries. But I think it's to find that harmony, that agreement between your inner needs and wants and desires and your outer behavior. And interaction with the world brings about self-actualization in a really nice way and so I see them as, as working in tandem.

Rachel (2:20)

Janani, you mentioned choosing to be authentic at one point and, Trevor, you seem to take into account other people's needs - like you said, dignity or things like that - when deciding whether to be authentic. And I'm, I'm wondering, do you feel like you can be your authentic self most of the time?

Trevor (2:41)

I do feel like I can be authentic much of the time. Most of the time. The times when, when I can't, that are most salient to me are, are the times I would say where my safety comes into question. And that's usually at the hands of my sexual orientation. Where, if there's a place that

has open signs of hostility towards, you know, the LGBTQ+ community, I will change my behavior in a way that is very unauthentic. Sometimes, if I'm with my husband, and we're in a place that has, let's say, very visible signs of hate, and maybe actual posters, and I have to be there, I'll take off my wedding ring so that people can't see us wearing the same ring together, and change my behavior accordingly. But those situations aren't frequent. And in my current life, given where I live, and where I, where I spend my time, those are much less frequent than they have been at other times. And so I do find that, that I can be my authentic self most of the time.

Janani (4:00)

I think that's a really interesting example because when I was thinking about your question, Rachel, I was thinking specifically about my identities of being a woman, and of being someone who grew up outside of the US - being an international student. And I was thinking about these identities specifically at work. And I think I use a lot of ways to navigate professional situations in a way that don't make me stand out or don't draw attention to my behaviors or yeah, behaviors, let's leave it at that. I'm thinking specifically about my accent, which is something that you know, it's a way I express myself every single time I have a conversation with someone. And I definitely indulge in code switching; so the accent that I'm talking in right now is what I consider my more westernized Americanized accent, versus I know that when I talk to my family or when I talk to my partner who's also Indian, my accent shifts significantly. And it's something that I've always kind of wondered about in the sense of authenticity is, am I being authentic? Is, is this my new reality? Is having to accept sort of my new version of authenticity? I don't know. And I'm thinking about when I mentioned that there are certain behaviors that I use to mask sort of the stereotypes that are often associated with women in professional spaces. And I'm thinking about the up-talk, right? When, at the end of a sentence, the pitch or the tone of your voice goes up and it seems like you're asking a question more than asserting yourself. I notice myself doing that a lot, noticed myself, when I'm in meetings, the way I ask questions or the way I jump into conversations, I know that I am very deliberately teaching myself to act in certain ways. And again, I just go back to the question of what is authenticity? Maybe that's not the behavior I was used to. But if I am retraining myself to act in certain ways, is that my new reality? I don't know. But I guess to answer your question, I don't think I'm being authentic a lot of times and I think that is a conscious choice so as to blend in better.

Trevor (6:32)

I would consider code switching as still fitting under an umbrella of authenticity. For myself, I am probably most prone to switching between, let's say, different levels of masculinity or flamboyance, depending on how you want to look at it. And also, if there's some scale of professionalism, and/or maturity, if there was some hybrid of those, whatever that scale is, like dialing up and dialing down that. But I do think that most of those scales, most places on this scale still fit in a version that feels authentic to me, that I like that I can choose with, where I'm falling, and how I'm interacting with those people around me, and in many cases, can do that in a way that doesn't feel bad. And your example of your accent, I wouldn't think of that as

sacrificing your authenticity if it was to be taken more seriously, or to fit in in this country where maybe people are just more used to that. But if you were making that choice to, say, relate to somebody or be understood in a certain scenario more clearly, I would see that as you exercising your authenticity.

Janani (8:04)

I find that really interesting because I'm hearing this undertone of agency, right, and choosing spaces and ways in which we can be authentic. And I'm also hearing that maybe authenticity isn't a sort of binary situation, maybe it exists along a spectrum and, and we choose where to situate ourselves on that gradient. You know, Trevor, when you were talking about situations where you anticipated physical harm in a situation, and you talked about taking specific actions to prevent putting yourself in that situation, now I'm starting to think about: does that fit under the umbrella of authenticity, thinking about the fact that you exercised agency in that situation, regardless of the fact that you were pressured into that situation by external circumstances?

Rachel (8:59)

It sounds maybe like some people have more agency than others in terms of flexing their authenticity. So, Trevor, I heard you say that you feel like your authentic self most of the time and then and then you did have specific examples of when that doesn't feel as true. And Janani, I heard you say 'I don't feel like my authentic self most of the time.' And so I am wondering, do we all have the same amount of agency when it comes to choosing how we show up? How much that aligns with our authentic selves? How much that aligns with the demands of the context that we're in? Or do some people have more agency than others because of social identities they have and the ways in which those adhere to or align with privileged groups or social expectations that are connected to those identities?

Trevor (9:53)

You've put your finger on some of the ingredients that to me, I feel like underpin the outcome of authenticity. If I think about authenticity as an outcome, something that is achieved, I see absolutely social identities coming into the mix. And I also see, I'm trying to think of the right word, let's say mindset, how you inwardly process and feel about the things that are happening around you. And thirdly, the choices that you make, or your behavior that you choose. And so that comes together in the soup, in my case: I am white, I'm a male, and I am from the US, and here I am at a college in the US. And that is a choice that looks very different for me, than for someone like Janani, to make a choice to go to their college outside of, let's say, the country where they have citizenship. And so my choices also bear on my, on how my social identities are perceived, and thus how authentic I can be or can feel.

Rachel (11:13)

When I think about my current position as an adult who has a graduate degree and American citizenship, and just a lot of like social and cultural capital, I've been very able to put myself in situations where people want me to be authentic. And I made enough money in a different job

where, when I didn't feel like it was a good fit, I didn't feel like my authentic self was being valued or- at work, that I was having to stifle a lot of myself, I just left that job, got a different job. And I think my current socioeconomic privilege has made it really possible for me to leave jobs, leave apartments, even like places I was living, where I felt like my expression of my authentic self just wasn't accepted or welcome. Yeah, I just feel so acutely in my life right now the fact that my socioeconomic status affords me a lot of options about the contexts that I occupy and how I show up there and my ability to choose to remain there or choose to leave if it stops feeling like a place I can be authentic.

Trevor (12:28)

I'm hearing in, both of your responses or just your what you've included up to this point, this sense of knowing when authenticity isn't working out for you because of things around you, negative feedback you're getting or when you bump up against a boundary. And I don't think that means you can't be authentic, it means that it's harder to be authentic. And how you can deal with that discomfort is gonna depend a lot on the situation. But I think is the choice that you get to make about, 'do I prefer to be authentic or not, given what I'm faced against?' So I think about, say, for example, there was somebody I met not too long ago who, when I used the word "husband" they laughed at me and kind of scoffed at the idea. And we spent lots of time together, we were at an activity of sorts, spent lots of time together throughout that day, got to know each other, learn a lot about each other. And that person grew from that, they learned new things, I think, opened up a bit. And was it uncomfortable for me? Absolutely, for quite a bit of it. But I can handle that. And I actually feel good having handled that. I probably couldn't have always handled the situation like that and that's something I've had to work on over time. But I also think that kind of being able to handle something - discomfort - and still assert yourself is partially where allyship is born from and I value allyship quite a bit. And there's also discomfort that is maybe- seems less productive. I was trying to think of a good scenario for this and all I could come to was if I imagined an introvert going to a networking event: Asserting their authentic self might not help them get out of that event what they want to but they would still be authentic. So you really have your mindset to think about 'what do I bring out and what do I push back based on what I can get out of this scenario?' But I don't think being authentic is always going to lead to a comfortable scenario. And I don't always think because it's uncomfortable you can't be authentic.

Rachel (15:04)

I do think some people's authentic selves are more palatable to others than other people's authentic selves. And so I'm thinking, Trevor, about an example where we had gone on like a date, we were, we were talking and he had made a joke about me being his secretary. And I said, like, "No, I don't want to be your secretary." And he kind of kept pushing it and at some point, I just said, "I don't think this is funny." And this person said, "Oh, I don't think we're actually a good match. Like, I don't think we should keep talking." And that was really informative to me and I was glad to have been my authentic self, but I think that's a way in which, me being my authentic self, there was a consequence: this person decided they did not

want to continue learning about me. And, Trevor, I hear that as being different from the situation you described, where yes, you were experiencing discomfort and you persisted in your authenticity and the other person, I think you described them as having learned or having grown, and you kind of got to know each other. And so that was a situation, at least the way you described it, where you were your authentic self and it didn't cause someone to pull away from you. And this is a question for both of you is, is you know, when you are your authentic self, do you feel like people appreciate it?

Trevor (16:21)

I would say I feel very confident that when I'm authentic, people seem to appreciate it, people around me. My department has a diversity and inclusion program which I was a coordinator of for a year and a half, which gave me just a lot of time to talk about myself as it pertains to issues going on and in our lives in our department. And honestly, the more authentic and I would say vulnerable I was, those are frankly the only times I would get positive feedback. If I was particularly authentic, especially in a way that maybe bucked a trend of how things usually go, those are the moments when I get emails after the meeting that say, 'thank you for doing that, I really appreciate that, that I'm going to take that thing to heart.' And so it's funny how some of those moments of being authentic are kind of the only times I get a very clear positive feedback signal from it.

Janani (17:26)

I think that's a really an interesting example, Trevor, because when I was thinking about spaces where my authenticity has been appreciated, I noticed some power dynamics there. I noticed myself wanting and able to be more authentic in spaces where I had more of a leadership role. I'm thinking about when I supervise undergraduate students in the lab, and I find myself wanting to and consciously making steps to be more authentic and be clearer and more open about my life experiences there. And I noticed that I tend to be more hesitant about being my authentic self when I am in situations where I don't have power, whether that's because of the professional hierarchy that I'm in or whether that's because of the combination of social identities in the room.

Rachel (18:19)

I am wondering, because it sounds like an undertone of our examples of times we've been authentic, it sounds like it feels good, or it feels better than not being authentic, and, and I'm wondering if in general, you think it's, it's always better to be authentic than not?

Janani 18:40

I don't think I've always felt good when I when I've been authentic. Some of the times I've been most authentic I remember feeling extremely nervous. I remember feeling physical tremors or shakes, but I chose to be authentic regardless. And I'm thinking about this example, when I had a work collaboration that was really not going well, working styles did not mesh, now that I look back on it, I think there was definitely some of these power dynamics that we talked

about: there were gender dynamics, there were you know, positions of hierarchy, the person I was collaborating with had a more senior position than I did. And this just wasn't working out. And at one point, I decided to say that I didn't want to continue being part of this, this project anymore, and I wanted to step back, and I had to give myself a pep talk for 48 hours prior to that conversation. I would have avoided if I could. But also if I avoided it then I would have to continue suffering through more weeks or months of this collaboration that was taking a lot from me. That's just one example of how being authentic actually felt terrible both on a physical level, I was very exhausted after that conversation, but also on a mental level, I left feeling like I wasn't fulfilling my commitments. Because I had promised to work on this project with this person, I left feeling like I was a terrible professional, because I couldn't see through these commitments. But a few months later, I was very grateful that I did that and I told them exactly how I felt about it. So yeah, it didn't feel great, but was great in terms of consequences.

Trevor (20:37)

I want to put on some giant rose-colored glasses here, and have at this idea of whether it's better to be authentic than not: I think it absolutely is. And when I say that I'm talking from the perspective of authenticity is, it's a separation between who you feel you are, and how you behave or who you want to be. And when I think about what is its opposite, I think the opposite of authenticity, at its best is essentially conformity. And at its worst is lying. And I would take human uniqueness over conformity or being lied to any day. There are absolutely places where I draw the line. Like I said before, I draw a line at safety, you shouldn't have to sacrifice your safety for being authentic, I draw the line at a level of discomfort that is unmanageable, uncopeable. I don't know if that's a word "un-cope-with-able" [laughter]. And I think you absolutely don't get to trample on somebody else, or be cruel, for your own ability to be authentic. But beyond that, I know the exercising of authenticity as leading to confidence and a feeling of agency or autonomy and self-esteem and better performance at work or feeling understood, less internal strife. So when I look at it through those rose-colored glasses, I'll take the good, I'll take the good side, I'll take the side that feels like it leads to some positivity.

Janani (22:34)

I was hearing you talk about conformity as the opposite of authenticity and it sounds like it came from a place of, of genuine joy that you felt just being yourself in spaces and receiving that feedback that your authenticity was appreciated. And I'm thinking about how that stands in contrast to all of the times when I have molded myself into conformity because of all the ways that I was different. Interestingly, I also did that for a greater sense of satisfaction and joy. Because not standing out, not being the person who pronounces things differently, you know, not being that speaker at a seminar whose accent everybody focuses on and not the content, is one of the reasons why I think I code switch, for example, and it's a very unconscious process. I just think it's very interesting that we are finding that sense of personal fulfillment in, in such different ways and just arriving at it from very different places.

Trevor (23:49)

It is context dependent. For sure. I think I, I betrayed my true meaning when I used the word "uniqueness." And I'm going to stall while I try to think of the right word, but I don't mean, I don't mean unique in the sense of the only one of anything, or an outlier. But I'll take *you*, I will take the things that are truly you over the things that you might be doing to fit in the surroundings. Anytime barring, barring going outside of those boundaries of things I was listing that are definitely not okay. But that is that is the richness of humanity there. I don't love the idea that everyone around me would be falling towards some mean. I think that I see in that the washing out of vibrancy. I understand why it might need to be done in many cases. But I would prefer the opposite.

Janani (24:57)

I do see where you're coming from and I that's such a more vibrant and, and hopeful world, inclusive world than the one that I feel like I'm part of right now. And it's interesting, because just continuing on, you know, this theme of ways in which we present differently or sound different, I also know of people who have embraced that aspect of themselves. Yeah, I don't know, maybe...Sorry, I'm still just digesting everything that Trevor said, because there's so many things I hadn't thought about before. I'm thinking about creating a world that enables all of us to be authentic. And I'm thinking about the fact that those of us, maybe, who have more power to be authentic in certain spaces, maybe we need to exercise that power because change happens in small increments.

Trevor (26:01)

I don't know what that world looks like. I really don't. And it's also not the first place my mind would go to is how to change the world to accommodate that. But rather, it feels more salient to me to think about, given the way that things are, how do we work on our resilience? I'm going to shift back to me and say, How do I work on my resilience? How do I work on the places where I choose to be and the people I associated with in a way that allows me to be more authentic?

Janani (26:41)

I'm just thinking about a couple of different things. So to me, it feels like there's a constant push and pull. I do think that I could get more comfortable with discomfort, building this resilience, like Trevor was pointing out. I'm picturing resilience like a balloon that's coming out of me and I'm thinking about the world sometimes pushing harder and sometimes pulling back a little bit. And I'm also realizing that when I think about the world, what I'm really thinking about is my world. So who are the people that I interact with and what are the spaces that I am present in? Which is kind of why I was thinking about exercising authenticity in small ways to make those spaces more capable of authenticity from other people. And I'm thinking again, because I talked about how I find it easier to be authentic when I am in a position of power because of some combination of identities. And so modeling authenticity, but also accepting that for some people, authenticity, might look a lot like conformity. I sometimes struggle to

find the boundaries between what are my actual thoughts versus what are things that I have been conditioned to think and they worked well for me so I've just continued to believe them. Thinking about the fact that maybe somebody else's conformity is, you know, my authenticity.

Trevor (28:26)

I love that it might be. Even if your authenticity looks like conformity, I would still absolutely celebrate that it was your authentic self.

Rachel 28:38

I want to celebrate what you've contributed to this conversation about authenticity, all your thoughts and your feelings and the things that you feel clear about and the things that that still feel unresolved. I really, I really appreciate both of you being part of this conversation on "I" Statements, a podcast from Cornell University's Intergroup Dialogue Project. This podcast is produced by me, our cover art is by Bryan Garner, and our music is written and performed by Evan Wilhelms. If you want to reach out with an idea for a future episode topic, you want to tell us where or when or how you feel most authentic, we'd love to hear from you. You can find our email address and other information about our program at www.idp.cornell.edu. Thanks and bye.