Rachel: Hey! We recorded this episode on March 6th, 2020. Coronavirus had already affected the lives of many throughout the world, but the World Health Organization had not yet declared it a pandemic and things here in the US still felt mostly normal. Things are different now, and I hope that you're finding ways to take care of yourself and the people you love. Our next episode of *"I" Statements* is going to be about community and we would love to include some of your voices in that episode. If you want to, feel free to record a voice memo describing what "community" means to you and email it to us at idp@cornell.edu. Maybe sending us a little voice memo is one tiny way to connect during this time of social distancing. I hope that you have what you need in order to find emotional closeness despite physical distance and that you're able to foster safe and sustaining connections with yourself and the people who comprise your community. Take care.

[music]

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

Baba: How's it going? My name is Baba Adejuyigbe. I also work in IDP, and a word that comes to mind when I think about humility is "maturity."

Janani: Hello! My name is Janani Hariharan and I am a graduate student at Cornell University, but I also work with IDP and one word that comes to mind for me when I think about humility is "openness." I think of two prominent roles that I play right now as a graduate student. So one of them is a learner, as a student, but then also as a teacher. And I think, in that student role, humility is sometimes more easy for me to practice just because I've been taught that, you know, as a student you don't know very much and you're sitting in these classrooms and you're waiting for the information to sort of come at you and you need a certain level of receptiveness or open this to be able to absorb this information and I think I sort of step into those spaces thinking that there's so much that I don't know and I can gain from others. Versus as a teacher, what's interesting is I have noticed myself sometimes falling into this trap of "I am the Supreme authority and I'm going to tell people everything I know" versus– my actual learning and teaching philosophy is I think at odds with that because I think it is a two way street and I think there is something I can learn from my students even in my classrooms. And I'm gonna stop there.

Baba: Yeah, I think it's so interesting that you talk about kind of varying kind of– a context being easier and harder to practice humility. I think I've had a lot of messages about humility and a lot of messages about what it means to be humble. I think I heard messages from people around me like my family and friends. My mom used to stress that, like, it's important to always be humble, it's important to always do this. I played a lot of sports as well and my coaches would stress the importance of humility in sports as well, but I didn't really quite internalize what it meant to be humble. And I think that really happened when I started being more open to what people were saying, listening not to respond but listening to actually hear what people were saying, and actually internalize this idea of humility a little bit more and it became more concrete to me as I was exposed to multiple different perspectives, specifically around social identity, I think.

Rachel: Social identity comes to mind for me when I think about my own experience of humility because I am so humbled by the experience of having had a huge blind spot related to being a white person for the first 22ish years of my life that I can look back now and see that race was playing a role and that I was completely unaware of that and so just bringing that, like, I have not been perfect at thinking about social identities throughout my life, I have not been perfectly aware. I know that that's almost certainly still true.

Baba: Yeah, yeah, I too have not been perfect [laughter] throughout my life. I too have had some blind spots as well. And I think those moments where I've really deepened my relationships with humility, with this concept of humility, has been in those moments where I've challenged myself to kind of be aware of those things that I wasn't aware of. Or, or, where I've naturally been challenged, maybe, to be aware of things that I maybe wasn't aware of. Yeah.

Janani: This is interesting and it's making me think about the instances where I have been made aware of some of my blind spots, right. Even with respect to identity, I'm a straight person and I've been made aware of some of my blind spots and some of the assumptions that I've made by friends who are not straight. And I'm just thinking about, you know, what are ways in which I can challenge myself to be more humble and make myself more open without putting the burden on other people of pointing out these blind spots to me and making me aware and making me humble? Versus, you know, me myself stepping into that humility a little better.

Rachel: So you talked about the challenge of choosing humility without an impulse from the environment, like someone else bringing a blind spot to your attention. What

are some other– what are some things that make it difficult or complicated for you to be humble?

Baba: For me, it's so interesting because humility has been something that has changed in the way I think about. I'm a black man and so when I was thinking about humility from this respect, I was thinking about my race and thinking about how, when I was younger, I would often centralize this social identity as being the most salient and the most important to the extent that I never really would acknowledge any anything else really. And I felt, right, during those times, that humility was something that I didn't necessarily need to practice because I didn't– the world was telling me that I wasn't enough, the world was telling me that I was a villain, the world was villainizing me, the world was stereotyping me in a way that I didn't have a lot to be humble for. Or I felt like I didn't have a lot to be humble for. It appeared, right, that I didn't have a lot to be humble for. But I think when things changed was when I was just made more aware that I had privileges. I had privileges. Even though I was oppressed with regard to my race, I had privileges outside of my race. I'm a man, I'm a heterosexual man. That comes with a lot of privilege. I'm privileged in that I speak English as a first language and things like that so there are lot of places in which I can find privilege. And then, then it kind of dawned on me that humility is actually not something that should be associated with power and privilege at all. Humility is something that everyone should be internalizing. Humility is something that everyone *can* internalize and the way or the foundations in which I was– that I was using to define humility, I think, was wrong and I think those things have since shifted, which is awesome.

Janani: I do think we live in a world that doesn't always reward humility

Rachel: Mhm.

Baba: Yeah.

Janani: Especially in a quote-unquote "professional setting" because I was raised– so I'm a South Asian woman. I was raised with this idea that, you know, putting your head down and working and being humble and just sort of quietly doing your job was what was going to give me the most success or the most advancement in my career. And it's funny because when I did actually start going to college and going to graduate school and even working for a short while, I found that those things didn't actually always guarantee me success. A lot of times people didn't pick up on any of my thoughts because I was being really quiet and I was, you know, to paraphrase,

putting my head down and working, right? So there's just so many conflicting messages about self-promotion and the role of humility in science and research and I just– it's confusing sometimes especially as a woman, especially as a woman of color. It's like, how do I strike this balance between being humble, displaying this humility as a form of openness, as a form of inviting collaboration and understanding, but then also being assertive enough to say, "this is my authentic personality, this is what I bring to the table, and this is what I can offer?" I don't know, I don't know the answer to that but that's one of the things that makes it really hard, living in a world that doesn't always reward you to be humble.

Baba: It's interesting because you talk about how your social identity as being a woman, right, intersects with your ability to be humble and earlier I spoke about how my social identity with regard to my race, right, intersected with my ability to be humble as well. I'm just– it's just so interesting to me to think about how our different social identities impact our abilities or impact our relationship with humility. I think within social identities in which I have more power, I find it easier to not be humble or I find myself more consciously having to practice humility around these social identities. The power and privilege I experience as a man, I have to think about as I try to be better about the way I move through the world as a man, as I try to be an ally to people who identify as other genders and things like that. I guess I, in doing that, in trying to be better, in striving to be better, I've had to be more conscious in practicing humility around that because I have knowledge that I have power and privilege in this and therefore I feel a responsibility, I feel a sense of responsibility, to practice a sense of humility because I think my natural disposition within the social identity is to not be humbled, contrasting that to, let's say my race for instance, where I've been socialized to take pride in it but environmentally and the world around me, kind of tells me not to take pride and that tells me that I'm lesser. And so within this social identity, I'm less inclined to practice humility. I'm more inclined to, for instance in the conversations about race, take up more space because I feel as if my very visceral kind of experiences with being discriminated against and things like that, I feel that I need to share them so I could bring light to the issues that I've experienced, to *my* issues. And in that way, it kind of doesn't feel like I'm being humble because "I'm black, it's *my* issue." But at the same time, right, it's my issue! And so I want to voice that, I want to voice that as well.

Rachel: This is not bad, but I noticed that you– when you're talking about your experience of a marginalized identity of race, this is your issue. When you're talking about an identity in which you have privilege, "oh I wanna

Baba: Yeah!

Rachel: “I wanna be an ally.”

Baba: Yeah!

Rachel: “I wanna”, you know?

Baba: Yeah, absolutely!

Rachel: And so I feel that visceral connection or lack thereof coming through and it's interesting.

Baba: Yeah, yeah, it's so much, like, even in– like the socialization almost runs as deep as even in the way I talk about it, almost. There’s that “I have more privilege as a man. Therefore…” There's still that, like, almost arm’s length level of disconnect with the way I'm talking about this, which I'm working on, really working on daily. I'm trying to get better at that.

Janani: I mean that is one of the costs of privilege, right? That is one of the first ways I become aware of my privilege in that there's this feeling of this distance or this disconnection and I'm like, okay let's pause. Why do I feel distant? Why do I feel not connected even when the rational part of my brain is telling me that this is an important issue but I don't feel emotional resonance. Why? Just because I haven't engaged with it enough. I haven't had to engage with it, right? Had the privilege of distancing myself. It’s just such a real part of privilege.

Baba: Yeah, absolutely.

Rachel: Yeah. And I think, um, I also notice myself having strong reactions not only about the marginalized groups I'm part of, but anger towards people who have privilege in that identity. So an example that comes to mind that I think is relevant to humility is: I was at a big event with a podcaster who was giving a talk. Jad Abumrad, I'm talking about you. Someone introduces Jad, Jad gives a talk, and then they open it up for a Q&A and because it's a big space, they have ushers running around with microphones so if you want to ask a question, you raise your hand, usher brings you a mic, and you ask your question. After about the third question, I noticed that everyone who asked a question sounded like a man and I thought, “I don't have anything worth asking. This is a huge room, I can't think of anything interesting enough to merit

demanding this microphone, denying someone else the chance to ask a question, putting myself out there, what if my question doesn't make sense? I'm definitely not gonna– I don't have anything to ask." And I did ultimately put my hand up because I thought, "Ugh, I'm just gonna, I just, I'm gonna be so mad if we only hear from men." And sure enough, that's what happened, right. They had two more questions and the mics were already distributed so I didn't get a chance to share and I went up to an usher afterwards and I said to her, "Did you notice that everyone who asked a question was a man?" And she goes "Oh my god, I had no idea." And I said, "Did you see any women even raise their hands?" and she said "I didn't, I didn't." And, and it was so shocking. It was just a slap in the face of "oh this is how gender works." We went to this talk that was not about gender. There were people not of one gender there, right, it was a very mixed gender group. The only people we heard from – the person who introduced the speaker, the speaker, everyone who asked a question – the only voices we heard were men. And, in that sense, I see my humility as being a real problem because there were other people who did not stop themselves from asking a question.

Baba: Yeah.

Rachel: And so I see myself contributing to this, you know. It's not only that the men in that room felt entitled to ask their question and be part of the conversation, but I as a woman stopped myself from being part of the conversation so I am part of this.

Baba: Yeah, yeah.

Janani: As I'm listening to you talk, Rachel, I find myself being shocked at how not surprised I am because I'm a woman in science and this happens at every single seminar and every single conference I attend and this is– I mean, so I know that, for instance, that there are some people who are deliberately structuring Q&A sessions differently now to do this and this is not just the gender dichotomy. There's also a dichotomy of power, right? There's professors versus graduate students and postdocs in different stages of their career, having different stages of expertise. And then, of course, I find myself sometimes in a double bind of, "I am a graduate student, I'm just starting out in this field, I'm also a woman. I don't know. Am I, do I have things to contribute to this conversation? Should I just sit back and listen and let the wisdom wash over me? And it's funny because sometimes I have found myself in situations where I'm sitting there and listening to the questions and I find myself being able to answer some of the questions that are being asked, maybe just because I was paying attention to what the speaker was saying or maybe because, surprise surprise, this is

actually my area of expertise so this is something I study and I actually know something about this, which is when it hits me that "oh, I could actually ask a very educated question. I'm just not doing it." But I'm just wondering, right, and I've been trying to be more conscious of this when I help host a seminar, for example, or I help host an event. How do we do it? How do we do it in a way that we're encouraging people who might have less power – whether that's because of their professional identities or their social identities – to be able to not talk themselves out? You know, maybe that involves being like, "Hey professors, we're going to actually start by taking questions from graduate students for 10 minutes. We'll get to you next" But yeah it's, I don't know, I don't know what a good way is to…

Baba: And, you know, as you all have shared your personal experiences, I'm sitting over here thinking, you know, how can I, specifically in similar instances, in the instance that you described Rachel, and scenarios that you're describing Janani, how can I be conscious about the fact that maybe I'm taking up a little bit too much space here and without necessarily being like, "oh you should ask a question" and then I'm, like, telling you what to do, you know? And so it's like, it's complicated for me. How can I both be conscious of the fact that maybe I have a little bit more privilege in this space and be more conscious of potentially gender dynamics that are playing out which are so, so kind of pertinent when you talk about them and so pertinent to you, I'm sure, in those moments but to me, sometimes they are just going over my head. And that is coming purely from a place that I have privilege within that identity. How can I be conscious of these dynamics, be more conscious of these dynamics?

Rachel: And I think, to that point, I talked about that as my perception through a gendered lens, but it's never just gender dynamics, right?

Baba: Yeah, absolutely.

Rachel: So, you know, we show up to the same talk and I, as a white person, feel emboldened to talk a blue streak. The identity that was most salient to me in that situation was gender but it was not the only identity at play, right? And Janani, you mentioned how professional roles can also inform our experience of social identities in those contexts and so, yeah.

Baba: Yeah, yeah.

Janani: I think there are a lot of invisible layers that have become, that I have become more aware of ever since I started this, I think of it as the "one second stop, wait,

respond" which is really essential, right, to challenge my own assumptions because a lot of times I find that a lack of humility on my part stems from this assumption that I have a lot of information in the situation and I know exactly what's going on. But that one second, sort of, "Okay let's wait, reassess. Maybe someone here knows something I don't. How can I make space for that?" And I realized that the more I started doing that, A) I was trusting people more, right? I was valuing them more because I was seeing and hearing more from them than I had before just because I was giving them the opportunity to be seen and be heard. And I was trusting them more, I was valuing them more, but also just making life richer for myself because I'm starting to see all these invisible layers that I just hadn't been aware of, purely because I was taking things for granted,

Baba: Yeah, absolutely.

Janani: Which is why, it's just a better way to live.

Rachel: Much of our conversation up to this point has been about our experience of humility as individuals or how we notice a lack of humility in other individuals. What happens when we sort of zoom up a little bit and think about humility not at the level of individual people, but at the level of groups? So an example that comes to mind for me is the story about America that I've been told as someone who grew up in the United States, definitely this story that America is only a force for good in the world and that we are awesome. I don't hear a lot of humility in that story and so when I think about this American identity, humility is not connected to it at all. When I think about my gender identity, humility is completely intertwined with it and so, you know, what is the way that humility connects to these different groups that we belong to?

Janani: Something I have been thinking about, which is sort of an imperfectly formed idea in my head but I'm just going to throw it out there anyway – it's a safe space and I hope you will not judge me. [whispering] You're like, "I will judge you."

[laughter]

Rachel: No no, no no.

Janani: So I'm thinking about specifically the South Asian community when they move to the US. And there's this model minority myth, right, for a lot of Asian communities who come to the US and this idea that we take on the characteristics that the dominant social group finds acceptable and this is a way of assimilating. And I'm just

wondering if we're actually using humility as a form of assimilation there. But I'm just thinking about, you know, what are the sort of thought processes that go into that process of assimilation? There is definitely an assumption that there is a dominant social group and there's things that they find acceptable and okay to let you survive and thrive in a particular environment. And then, I think there's a certain humility associated with saying, "You know what? I'm going to transition from things that were familiar and known and acceptable in this culture that I came from and I'm going to move into this new culture and I'm going to mold my personality and my lifestyle to these habits. I wonder if that's a form of fake humility, just because it seems like there's an intention to that. It seems like there's an intention to sort of, I don't know, molding yourself differently. There's a goal, right? There's a goal you're trying to achieve by doing that. And I think where I was coming from with that was, you know, obviously noticing other people in my social group and the things that they do and the lives they lead in the US, but I'm also thinking about my upbringing in India and I know that there was a lot of internalized racism in there, a lot of colorism just within the South Asian community. And I feel like, often times, we tend to put ourselves down even if other people don't. We just do it *for* them sometimes. And there's just this idea of Western countries being more progressive and more developed and just having more resources and doing all the things. Like when I moved to the US, for example, to pursue higher education, everybody would just unanimously agree on the fact that this would be a great thing for me

Baba: Yeah.

Janani: And this would be one of the best opportunities I could ever get in my life but nobody talked about those hidden costs that I would have to experience, right? Loss of culture, loss of connection to my community, um, I think my train of thought got interrupted a little bit so I'm gonna stop there and if it comes back to me, I'll continue later.

Rachel: Okay, yeah.

Baba: Yeah it's, it's so complicated. In the same way, right, people– when I got into school in the US, people were like, "this is gonna be super good for you." And that was the default kind of thing, but there wasn't this sense that you could potentially drift away and feel a disconnect with culture, and with a sense of culture, and things like that. But I feel like that worry was almost mitigated by the sense of pride that I took in being Nigerian, that I think a lot of Nigerians had. And so I was like, "Well I'll just replicate my community wherever I am." kind of thing. And so I guess in that way,

I didn't– even though that definitely was a fear for sure, it hasn't been as real of an experience for me. I still feel quite connected to my culture and my sense of culture. Yeah it, I don't know, I still feel connected.

Rachel: Yeah. I'm wondering, what are the implications for– because it sounds like there are certain people who are expected to be humble. Part of what I also hear is that there's this expectation that dominant groups or dominant cultures, people have to be humble to those, but those cultures are never expected to be humble or change at all. I've never felt this as an American, that I need to bend to anyone's expectations of how I show up or that I need to somehow be different in order to be successful here. It sounds like dominant groups are not really expected to be humble in the way that more marginalized or outside groups are expected to demonstrating humility.

Janani: I'm thinking about your example of, you know, being an American and not necessarily being expected to change your ways or accommodate, um, people even– and it's interesting because that really resonates with me, not because I'm an American, but because I'm on the opposite side of that. But I've been told so many times, whether it's in jest or actually in seriousness, that "well… this is America. Get used to it." And I'm thinking about this one time I was at trivia night which, you know, you would expect to be a lighthearted fun event. It was um, it was a Harry Potter trivia night.

Rachel: Of course, yes.

Janani: Harry Potter fans, please feel free to reach out to me.

[laughter]

Janani: So this round was about images. So in each header of the books, there's an image at the top of the chapter. This image is different between the UK versions, which is what a lot of people in the world – including me – read, which is the Bloomsbury versions, versus the Scholastic books, which were printed in the US. And so the version, the sheet, that they sent out to the trivia participants was the Scholastic books, right? This was in Ithaca, New York. And after the round was over, my team was all actually people from India and so we had read the Bloomsbury books. And we pointed this out to them, right. We were like, "Hey just so you know, this is a difference. We're not saying you did anything illegal or wrong, but this is a difference. Not everybody had read the Scholastic books growing up so this was a little hard for us and other people might have experienced the same thing." And their response was

just, “Well, this is America. Get used to it.” And that was definitely one of the funner instances when this happened. Because it was like, there were no serious consequences to me because of this. I didn’t win a trivia round. Fine, I’ll live with it, you know? But yeah.

Baba: For me, I'm thinking about, for instance, like race. And I'm thinking about how, in advocating for myself, humility may not be the best option. And I'm thinking about how, on the other side, people who experience privilege due to race, humility might be all that I want them to exhibit. If I'm coming at you from a place where I'm not exhibiting humility, yet I'm expecting you to be humble, that's hard. I don’t know how to do that. But that’s often what happens. And I think, um, working through it is tough and complex, but I think it starts with at least both groups exhibiting the humility to hear each other’s perspectives, to hear different perspectives, and I think the humility to hold space, I think, for different perspectives to wholly exist, not in half ways. And I think addressing issues from that respect, I think, is a good way to go about it or is a way to start going about it. But it's hard, it's very hard.

Janani: I’m just thinking about, from an allyship perspective, how hard it can be to get to the place of humility sometimes, even though I think we're all agreeing on the fact that it is an essential component of being an ally. Because I'm just thinking about all the different things I feel, for example, when I'm made aware of my privilege, right. There’s different sort of stages of processing that, I feel. There’s a lot of negative emotions in there, there's a lot of guilt, there's a lot of shame, um, there's something anger. And I think it takes real work just both educating myself on what people from the group that I don't belong to have to say about this, but also just critical self-reflection on these emotions and where they come from. The anger, for example, where does that come from? Why do I feel angry when people point out my privilege to me, right? That's interesting, but also very critical to push down on that and see where that– because I cannot take that into a space of allyship.

Rachel: Right.

Baba: Absolutely.

Janani: It's counterproductive. And so I just, I think I'm almost feeling empathy for people who are being made aware of their privilege and want to be humble. But it takes a lot of work to move past some of this negativity that’s sometimes natural, but get to this productive place of where you can start to be actually open and listen and do the things that need to be done.

Rachel: So much of what you said really resonates with me in terms of seeing humility as being so connected to the openness necessary to continue exploring things, even when it is hard, even when it feels difficult, and may feel bad to be in that moment. I think also humility is such a great way forward. I see so much potential when I admit what I don't know and when I show up to a space curious and not thinking that I have to have all the answers or that I do have all the answers. Things are just more exciting when I show up with, what is going to happen? What am I going to learn? You know, how is my understanding of the world gonna be changed and brought closer to reality? Or, how is my understanding of myself gonna change? And I don't know, I think there's something also kind of fun in that.

Janani: I think you put your finger on the crux of why it's hard to be humble sometimes because, you know, how is my world gonna change? Not everybody is excited about that possibility. What is gonna happen? How is my world gonna change, you know?

Rachel: I didn't mean to imply that it's always easy for me to be excited about, you know, the way in which my understanding of the world or myself will change. I find this to also be often challenging, but it's not only challenging. There's also opportunity there and so, seeing the world in a more nuanced way, in a more surprising and beautiful way.

Baba: Yeah, yeah. I want to second that, because I think that's what's kept me going as well, is the reward, the immense reward that I've experienced.

Rachel: Yeah. So we are getting to the end of our conversation about humility. What is on your mind now?

Janani: I'm just thinking that I like the idea of being intentionally humble because so often I feel like, "well yeah, when I was a child it was drilled into me that humility was essential" and it almost felt like a chore. You know, it felt like something hard that had to be done because I had to be a good person. But, I like the idea of evaluating your needs for that situation. Right, because we talked about how it can be a double-edged sword sometimes. So evaluating your needs for that situation and then intentionally deciding to be humble. I just, I like that idea.

Baba: Rachel, you spoke about the opportunity that lies on the other end of humility and that's what's on my mind right now, actually. And the potential, you spoke about

the potential for humility and I think that's what's on my mind as well. Just how, powerful it is, it can be. But how you have to be intentional about it as well.

Rachel: Well, thank you both.

Janani: Thank you, Rachel.

Rachel: Oh very quickly, uh, before we wrap up, what Harry Potter house does everyone feel like they are a part of? Janani, you look like you have– you're ready.

Janani: Um, Ravenclaw. Loud and proud.

Rachel: Okay, okay. Nice, nice.

Janani: What about you, Rachel?

Rachel: Also, Ravenclaw.

[laughter]

Janani: Okay. We get to hang out in the tower!

Rachel: I can't wait.

Janani: Oh my god.

Rachel: Baba?

[laughter]

Baba: I think I'm a Gryffindor person.

Rachel: Mhm, mhm.

Janani: It's fine we can still eat meals together in the Great Hall. It's fine, it's okay.

Baba: Great, okay, thank you.

Rachel: The Great Hall, not very humble name.

[laughter]

Rachel: This podcast is made by Cornell University's Intergroup Dialogue Project. If you have ideas for future episode topics or a need to connect with Janani about Harry Potter, please do send us an email. You can find our contact information and learn more about our program at our website www.idp.cornell.edu. Thanks and bye.

Baba: I almost forgot, I'm a DJ, "DJ MD."

[laughter]

Baba: Um, um, follow me on Instagram, um, and catch me spinning around Ithaca. Thanks and bye.

[laughter]

Baba: Coming at you right now, outro music coming at you, the most fire tunes.