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A Challenge to Western Identity and Thought: Edward Sampson's *Celebrating the Other*

by Jason E. Piccone

When considering the theme of identity, people generally begin with the conception that we all possess some internal qualities that make us who we are. That is, we possess a "true-self" and through various situations and contexts we sometimes get pulled away from what we really are. For instance, suffering in an abusive relationship could make a happy, efficacious person feel helpless and depressed. It is the aim of some therapy techniques to free people from situational constraints in their lives so that the beauty of one's true self can flourish (e.g., Rogers, 1961). This conceptualization of identity is, however, not accepted in many non-Western cultures. In fact, in some cultures (particularly collectivist ones), people find it absurd to attempt to separate individuals from their social and cultural context because people and their environments are not distinct entities (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Identity is not an internal state; it is a fluid concept that oscillates according to the social and cultural context for which we exist.

In the book, *Celebrating the Other*, Edward Sampson (1993a) argues that identity is a social construction rather than a solitary one. Sampson critiques Western thinking for conceptualizing identity as something solely internal to each individual while conceptualizing others simply as props for the self, rather than as unique people in their own right. Further, he argues that since identity is a social construction, those who hold power are able to define the worth of their own ideals and qualities, often at the expense of the identity of other groups. Finally, he argues that we should adopt a perspective that celebrates the other as an equal contributor to our shared social existence.

The Social Nature of Identity

Sampson describes the Western sense of self as the "self-contained individual." The person is like a container: Everything inside is them, and everything outside is not. Outside forces that affect the person and his or her contents are a threat to the purity of the self. We can see this in

our language, for example, when tired, one might say "I'm feeling drained. I need to go home and recharge." This implies that their internal contents are running low, and by spending time alone, they can refill. Scientifically studying people according to this conception requires that we isolate people from all the elements of the world that could interfere with their true self. In Psychology, it is often considered preferable to bring people into a lab space where everything is controlled: there are no windows, people, or other stimuli that could affect a person. This process may improve the internal validity of a study, but does isolating a person from all the elements that contribute to his or her identity increase the accuracy with which we study them? Many critics claim that we can only understand a person (or object) if we consider the rich social and cultural context which they share with others.

Sampson argues that reality is not within us, it is between us. He recounts the example (provided by Vygotsky, 1978) of a child reaching out for an object. The caregiver interprets this act as a desire to have the object and hands it to the child. Due to the caregiver's actions, the child now understands that reaching for something, or pointing, is a way of expressing desire for it to others. In another culture, the caregiver might react differently, and thus the act of pointing towards an object will take on a different meaning. This social manner of learning is how we come to understand the world – it is highly dependent on the actions and reactions of others. Not only do we come to understand concepts and gestures through social processes, but we come to understand ourselves as well. A child shares his holiday candy with his friends to great accolades. "What great sharing!" The child learns that he is kind and thoughtful. As this person grows up and continues to act according to this identity, he safely infers that he is indeed a kind and thoughtful person. But is he really? He could have been raised in a different culture which emphasized looking after yourself and not trusting others. Upon sharing his candy, adults could have admonished him for being foolish, which could instead become his identity. In this sense, our identities are very dependent on one another, the culture in which we live, and our particular life situations.

Sampson draws upon the works of Mikhail Bakhtin to build this conception that people's identities are mutually interdependent. Baktin (1981) developed the concept of dialogism, originally to refer to literary work that continues a dialogue with previous work. Due to this dialogue, the meaning of both present and past work changes accordingly. This is in contrast to monologic work that is closed and static and does not acknowledge the existence of other work. This concept may be applied to identity or any other social construction. In a dialogic framework, people interact with each other as equal contributors, and through this process, the meaning of each person's identity is constructed. Western culture is dominated by a monologic ideal, where others are denied voice and not provided the opportunity to contribute equally to social reality.

Identity and Power

If reality is constructed, who does the constructing? Sampson argues that social constructions are based on power – those who have power are the constructors, those who have no power are the constructed. In Western history, the constructors, or those with power, have been predominantly white, male, and educated. The dominant group is given voice, whereas the other is denied voice. This denial of voice isn't necessarily intentional, but occurs in part because we define things according to how we see ourselves. For instance, an individual observing a tribal culture notes

that the people are peaceful. This reflects the observer as much as the observed – that the observer's culture is not peaceful. Thus, since the dominant group's ideals have been the basis for comparison for so long, this bias in perspective is embedded in our culture, science, and language.

Sampson cites Feminist theorists (e.g., Code, 1991; Miles, 1989), who argue that women have been constructed as the male's other, serving as props for the male. For instance, the female's identity as irrational and hysteric is necessary for the man's identity as strong and unwavering. Ironically, women are also judged negatively when they are perceived as too male. Hillary Clinton was perceived as too strong, or masculine in her leadership style during her campaign for president. Glenn Beck and others felt justified in calling her a bitch on national television or radio. As opposed to her male counterparts, many voters preferred that she had a lower self-esteem (Zeigler-Hill, & Myers, 2009). Women leaders face the paradox of being perceived as too feminine and weak, or too masculine and a bitch. Irigaray (1985) argues that the non-dominant groups cannot gain voice because in order to be heard, they must adopt the dominant voice. Yet, if the dominant voice is adopted, then the individual has already lost their own.

Sampson also cites theorists who argue that the same problem exists for non-white groups (e.g., Ellison, 1952; McGrane, 1989). Toni Morrison points out that African Americans are constructed as serviceable objects for white Americans, so that white Americans may possess their desired identity. Africans Americans are how white Americans come to be free, not enslaved; desirable, not repulsive, etc. (1992). She also recounts the example of the denial of voice to African Americans in literature. In Hemmingway's *To Have and to Have Not*, the protagonist, Harry Morgan is the prototypical ideal American white man – solitary, tough and self-sufficient. A nameless black man serves on a boat that Harry charters to assist in the duties of the ship. Hemmingway is faced with a dilemma as the boat moves into waters showing signs of containing fish. Morgan is too busy to notice the signs of fish, and the black man is not permitted to have a real voice. If he were to have a voice, he would transform from a prop for the white man to a real and independent person. This dilemma is solved with the line, "The nigger was still taking her out and I looked and saw he had seen a patch of flying fish burst out ahead and up the stream a little" (Hemmingway, 1962, p. 13). The protagonist retains his place as the dominant character with a true voice by seeing the other see. Morrison argues that if the black man had been given voice, then the protagonist would have been transformed from the dominant character, to a character who shares a (more or less) equal place to this other character.

As these examples demonstrate, the dominant culture maintains a monologic tradition where the dominant voice is the primary social constructor. A dialogic shift would contribute towards an equality of social power and a richer construction of reality.

Dialogism and Celebrating the Other

Sampson argues that by embracing the other, both in an intergroup and an interpersonal level, we not only allow people to possess their desired identity, we encourage a more constructive reality. This is the fundamental premise of dialogism. If we accept that our identity is multiplicitous, or that who we are depends on factors of our social, cultural environment, then we possess no "true self." This view strips away biases between groups. The female cannot be seen as lacking

masculine qualities when we acknowledge that our conception of female is constructed and not static. In denying people's multiplicity, they are more easily forced into their expected roles.

In dialogism, we should see that our freedom is not achieved despite others; it is achieved because of them. Conventionally, we tend to perceive that others prevent us from truly being ourselves. Sampson cites developmental theories, which outline the natural progression by which the individual successfully separates her/himself fully from caregivers and others. Further, psychological concepts such as reactance posit that people often react to others' attempts at persuasion by taking a stronger stance than original, simply to reassert their sense of self and autonomy. But since our reality is shared, attempting to separate ourselves from others will not sufficiently allow us to acquire freedom. On the contrary, "Human freedom involves the rights of individuals collectively to determine their mutual fates" (Sampson, 1993a, p. 168).

"But perhaps the greatest lesson of all, one that turns the tables rather completely on the self-celebratory project of the Western world, is simply that the celebration of the other lies at the heart of human life and experience. The other is a vital co-creator of our mind, our self, and our society. Without the other, we are mindless, selfless, and society-less, hardly a fertile field, then, for continuing to celebrate anything." (Sampson, 1993a, p. 109)

Conclusion

The social construction of reality contains important implications. Since our reality is constructed on dialogues, we can elevate our shared reality by elevating the content and quantity of our dialogues. Unfortunately, it seems our culture is increasingly distrustful and isolated (Putnam, 1995); people are reluctant to engage in an honest dialogue, or to willingly let their "contents" intermix with others. Further, the traditional Western perspective holds that in order to be free, one must be independent, or free from the influence of others. The dialogic framework makes it clear that true freedom can only result from cooperatively working towards a positive shared reality.

Sampson concludes by remarking that dialogism is crucial in a successful democratic society. A true democracy grants equal representation among citizens, yet a distinct division is typically made between those who know (the experts), and those who are ignorant (the general population). The experts in psychology claim to adopt an objective view of humanity for which scientific reports will be filtered down to the lay people. In fact, this view is not objective; it is based on a monologic reality – composed by the experts alone. A dialogic account recognizes that our understandings of human nature and reality are constructed by both the knower and the known. A meta-analysis performed by Eagly and Crowley (1986) found that men are more likely to help others, and women are more likely to be helped. This finding is an artifact for how helping behavior is conceptualized in a male-dominated view. The typical study involved a short-term heroic act – like running into a burning building to help strangers – which is consistent with male gender roles. Helping behaviors consistent with feminine gender roles (such as nurturance) were not as represented, thus indicating that women were the less-likely to help gender. In this instance, the experts, in an attempt at objectivity, define reality (in this case, helping behavior) in monologic terms. Sampson states that a in a true democracy, experts and lay people contribute and benefit equally to the shared reality.

Edward Sampson is a highly recognized critic of Western thought and science (e.g. Sampson, 1977; 1988; 1993b). *Celebrating the Other* presents an eloquent and thoughtful argument that continues to be relevant. Psychological science and the American cultural paradigm continue undeterred on a self-celebratory course. However, it is not until the other is allowed an equal voice that the full richness of reality, each other, and ourselves can be achieved.

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